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NOVEL
08



TRAPPED IN A DATING SIM

THE WORLD OF OTOME GAMES
IS TOUGH FOR MOBS

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"Um, there's something I would like to say to you."

The clanking of metal sounded as she set a dog collar on the table, complete with an attached chain.

For a split second, Nicks wondered if he'd neglected to take the one from yesterday with him. Then he noticed something strange about the one she'd brought.

This collar had a chain that was connected to yet another collar. Dorothea took one of them and fastened it around her neck.

 NICKS

 DOROTHEA



"We've
been
waiting
for you,
Big Bro.
Woof,
woof!"

"I've
caught
you meow,
Elder
Brother.
We'll act
up if you
don't
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YOMU MISHIMA

ILLUSTRATED BY

MONDA



Seven Seas Entertainment

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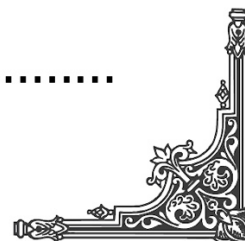
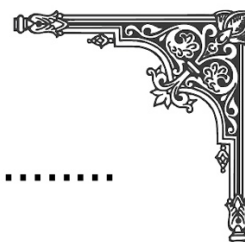
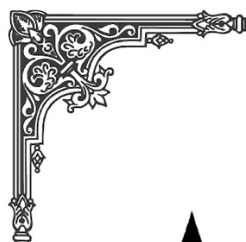
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It Was All a Dream

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Prologue

HUMANS ARE CREATURES of regret. They think, *If only I had done something different back then...* They insist upon brooding over matters they couldn't possibly change, even though the best they can hope for is to not repeat the same mistake.

As your average, run-of-the-mill kinda guy, I, Leon Fou Bartfort, have a hard time *not* screwing up the same way twice.

"I never thought it'd end up like this," I lamented.

"You brought this on yourself."

Today my partner Luxion was taking yet another opportunity to kick me while I was already down. Not that this was anything new. The guy made a habit of being cold toward me.

We were currently in Holfort Kingdom's harbor, which was located on a floating island directly above the capital. The place was always abuzz with the comings and goings of ships as crowds of people scurried to and fro; airships were swooping in to make their landing. The clamor was deafening, between whistles sounding and people shouting over each other.

Why was I here, you ask? Simply put: I was being all but forced to return back home. To my great displeasure, might I add.

"Leon, you pushed yourself too far. I know moving up another grade in the world means more responsibilities, but you need to make some time to rest. Otherwise you're going to pass out in no time," said a familiar voice.

"You worry too much about me, is all I'm hearing."

"That's the exact problem! You don't have a drop of self-awareness."

Despite Angelica Rapha Redgrave's pointed look, the concern was written all over her face. Her glimmering locks of long blonde hair were neatly braided and pinned up. The red dress she sported was obviously tailored to accentuate every line of her body, clinging to the tight curves of her voluptuous chest and her slender waist.

The end of the spring break would herald the final year of school for both of us. I had grown taller since I first enrolled and gained more muscle, while Angie had gained the charm of an adult woman.

Following behind Angie with luggage in hand were House Redgrave's maids. Among them was Cordelia Fou Easton, the woman who had looked after me during my stay in the Alzer Republic—an intelligent-looking, mature beauty, who sported glasses on her face. She regarded me today with icy cold indifference. I assumed she was inwardly admonishing me for causing her mistress undue stress.

Miss Cordelia hated my guts. From her perspective, I was lucky to have garnered the affections of her precious mistress, and yet I had stooped so low as to increase my number of fiancées while I was in the Alzer Republic. Aware as I was that she was itching to give me a piece of her mind, I had nothing to offer in my defense, so I resigned myself to her open hostility instead. Her scathing remarks left substantial burns, but I couldn't complain: She generally completed her work and didn't cause any trouble. She was a mature adult and comported herself accordingly.

A different girl gazed at me sadly, the wind tousling her flaxen hair. No, scratch that. "Girl" no longer fit the woman standing before me. Olivia had the same gentle air as always, but she'd begun to develop an inner fortitude to complement it.

"Mr. Leon, you *do* need some time off," she said, concerned. "I know you're really busy, but please...at least come back home for now and relax."

As the two girls suggested, I was about to leave the capital to return to my home in the countryside. *Or would it be more accurate to say they're dragging me back?*

"There isn't anything for you girls to worry about, I swear," I said, hand pressed over my face.

Why were they fussing so much to begin with? Well, it all started a couple of days ago...

“That jerk Roland is going to get his if it’s the last thing I do,” I hissed, seething with rage. “Luxion, get some dirt on him. Doesn’t matter what kind, just find something we can use against him. I’ll tattle to Miss Mylene.”

“You wish for me to expend the effort to investigate his weakness simply so you can run to the queen with it? How petty.”

“I don’t see what the issue is. Nothing wrong with being sly...or with being petty, for that matter. Believe you me, I’m going to make sure Roland pays for this.”

“Cleare should have intel on him.”

“Good. Looking forward to her report.”

Upon my return from my study abroad, I had (for reasons unbeknownst to me) become a marquess of all things. Worse, I now had an upper-third court ranking, which was impossibly high for an aristocrat like me. Such rankings in Holfort Kingdom were only granted to those who held the title of earl or greater and were either already part of the royal family or intrinsically connected to them. Those connections were a prerequisite for upper-third, and no manner of impressive achievements were enough for you to be awarded such a prestigious position otherwise.

Roland, being the loathsome scum-lord that he was, had forced both of those “honors” upon me. His plausible excuses were the great results I achieved in the Alzer Republic and that, since I intended to marry Angie, I would eventually be linked to the royal family anyway. Real talk: that was a bunch of subterfuge on his part to make sure I got stuck with this lousy promotion.

Okay, sure. I was engaged to Angie, who hailed from a ducal house and was therefore somewhere way, way down on the line of succession for the throne. Realistically, though, the odds were close to nil that she’d ever be in a position to inherit the crown. The only way I saw that coming to pass was if a horrific disaster were to befall the realm.

If moving up in society were as easy as marrying Angie to become a duke, then no one would have to break their backs trying to claw their way up the social ladder. Given my origins, acquiring the title of marquess in

this kingdom would have been near impossible in usual circumstances. No, that's a serious understatement. It *should* have been impossible. That treacherous snake Roland was the only reason I'd landed myself in this position.

Being the king meant he had the political power to make these sorts of maneuvers, unfortunately for me. He always had some kind of dirt on the other aristocrats—he admitted as much himself. While he wasn't typically one to take his duties very seriously, he would readily utilize the full range of his abilities to get back at me. Pissed me off.

As the cherry on top of the garbage platter, he'd appointed the five idiots as my vassals. I was officially tasked with being their babysitter, and Marie's to boot! It was only fun being around them because I was immune to whatever consequences their actions had. Now that they were my responsibility, the party was over. The promotion was less infuriating than being stuck with that bunch of dolts.

When Julius heard the other four boys would be serving under me, he insisted on joining in, claiming he'd be "lonely" otherwise. Had to wonder, did the guy understand that he was a prince? ...I doubted it. Things would never have gotten this bad if he'd grasped his role from the start.

To sum up, I was officially stuck with Marie and her nitwit companions. My attempts to rattle Roland by rampaging around in the Alzer Republic came back to bite me in the butt. Why? Why did I keep on repeating the same mistakes?

I continued talking to Luxion from where I was sprawled out on the bed in my inn room.

"Angie and Livia are headed this way, right?"

"Indeed. The ceremony is set to take place on the last day of spring break, but numerous preparations demand their attention before then."

I sighed. "At least when I don't know what to do, I can turn to Angie for help."

"Considering her breadth of knowledge regarding high society and the types of rules and norms observed during parties and formal ceremonies alike, I concur that her presence is most advantageous," said Luxion.

“Yup, she’s a lifesaver. I basically learned the bare minimum of etiquette.”

“Then please take this as your opportunity to better familiarize yourself. Neglecting to do so will inevitably bring shame upon yourself.”

“Yeah, yeah. Shame, disgrace, yadda yadda. Can we talk about how this whole situation seems like a cruel and unusual punishment? I’m the third son of a poor backwater barony, for crying out loud. Look at how far they’ve promoted me in two lousy years! Suddenly, everyone’s fondly referring to me as the second son of the household, and I’m a marquess on top of that. Don’t forget how I have to look after Marie and her entourage too.”

“There is a perfect phrase to encompass all of that, if I may be so bold: ‘You reap what you sow.’”

Two years had passed since I first entered the academy. So much had happened since then, not the least of which was the disavowal of the oldest son of the Bartfort household, Rutart, due to his mother’s adultery. That shoved me up to the position of second son, while my older, biological brother Nicks became the eldest. With Rutart no longer in line to inherit my father’s lands, Nicks was the new heir apparent.

Then there was me. I had independently secured a marquess’s title. Without a region of my own to rule over or any role to play within the court, I was an unemployed marquess with none of the benefits of my elevated status, just the cumbersome title weighing me down like an albatross. What an eventful couple of years it had been.

“I had tunnel vision, that’s all. All I did was try to solve the problems that cropped up in front of me,” I said.

“That’s a matter of perspective. One could argue that while you noticed the problems in front of you, you made any excuse possible not to deal with them. Once it was too late to fix them, you devised a way to forcefully tie everything together. Am I close to the mark?”

Ugh. This jerk has a bad habit of hitting me where it hurts.

“Y’know something? There’s nothing appealing about you. Not one thing. Now hurry up and give me my meds.” I cut the conversation there, eager to get to sleep.

“Are you requesting a sleep inducer? You are more exhausted today than you usually are. I’m of the opinion that you will sleep perfectly well without the aid of medication.”

“I’ve had pretty bad insomnia lately,” I admitted. “I’m worried I won’t get any shut-eye, okay? Just give it here.”

Sometimes I couldn’t sleep, no matter how exhausted I was. The rare times that I did manage to drift off, the sleep I got wasn’t restful, which left me drained by the time morning rolled around. Better to take the medicine than face that.

“I suspect this insomnia began because you shot Serge on the Raults’ behalf. You ought to have left that responsibility to Albergue,” said Luxion.

“I was more suited for it. I’ve gotten used to killing people.”

I had been sucked into numerous battles after coming to this world and had taken no small number of lives in the process. One or two extra kills wouldn’t increase the sins weighing on my shoulders by any significant amount.

“It is, however, the first time you have ever personally killed someone with a gun, correct? Taking someone’s life from a close range leaves a bigger impact than when one does so while piloting an Armor. Again, I must insist: You erred by taking on Albergue’s task unnecessarily. You made the wrong choice, Master.”

I huffed at him. “It doesn’t matter that much.”

“No. It does matter. You have sustained mental trauma by taking his life. I suggest you treat yourself better than you have been.”

“That’s what you’re worried about? You’ve got nothing to fear. I love myself, and I’m always my top priority over everyone else in my life.”

Luxion seemed exasperated with me. “You certainly like to mouth off, I will give you that. It’s even more difficult to argue with you given how skilled you are at lying.” His red lens moved from side to side, as if he were shaking his head. I had seen that gesture many times by now; perhaps as a consequence, his movements had grown more practiced and precise.

“Enough already. Give me the meds,” I said.

“I refuse.”

“I said *gimme*.”

“No.”

I scowled. “This is an order. Give me the medication.”

“In consideration of your health, I must employ my right to refuse your request here. Instead, I suggest spending time tonight reflecting on your mistakes.”

“I’ll happily do as much reflection as you want, once you let me get a good night’s sleep! Now, quit arguing with me and give me the stupid medicine!” I snatched his round, floating body in my hands. He struggled to break free of my grasp. I grappled with him and then chased him around the room as he tried to escape, making a shrieking cacophony until the door suddenly flew open.

“Mr. Leon! Um...what are you doing?” Livia paled as she looked at the two of us.

“Livia?! Uh—wh-what’re you doing here?” I asked.

“I realized I might be imposing on you, but I wanted to see you so badly... Um, anyway. Why are you fighting with Lux? That seems like a more pressing question.”

“N-no, that’s not what this is. He won’t listen to me, so I was just, you know...chastising him a tiny bit.” The excuse rolled off my tongue far too easily. Much to my misfortune, Livia had overheard our conversation before she entered the room.

“I thought I heard something about medication?”

Crap. She caught that, huh?

“It’s no big deal,” I assured her. “I wanted some meds to help me sleep. Nothing for you to worry about. R-really, I mean it.” I kept a firm grip on Luxion as I spoke, refusing to let him escape as I fixed Livia with a smile.

My efforts to assuage her fears were for naught. The more I tried to play off the matter, the more anxious she became.

“Does that mean you haven’t been able to sleep, Mr. Leon? Are you using medication to avoid dealing with the real issue...?” Her eyes misted

over. She looked like she might start crying at any moment.

“I mean it, I’m fine! We were just joking around, okay? Luxion and I are always like this!”

That was the truth, to be fair. The two of us were messing around like we always did. Still, from an outside perspective, I probably came off as a crazed addict begging for drugs.

I glanced at Luxion, whose red lens emitted an eerie glow. “C’mon, man, back me up here. You gotta tell her we were messing around so we can clear the air.” My voice dropped to a whisper. I was practically begging. More fool me. I should have known that this little junk ball was nothing but a traitor.

“Olivia, my master is presently in a dangerous mental state. I have requested that he take some time to rest and relax, but he refuses to heed my advice,” said Luxion.

“Why are you so eager to betray your master at the drop of a hat?!” I snapped at him.

“Our definitions of that word appear to differ. I do not view this as betrayal.”

“I bet all AI say that when they turn their backs on mankind. All you do is make convenient excuses for yourself, like some kinda deadbeat loser!”

“Deadbeat loser? An apt description for you, not I. But I digress. Shouldn’t you be speaking with Olivia right now instead of me?”

Loath as I was to do anything he told me to, I did sneak a glance at Livia the moment he mentioned her. She was thumbing away the tears that had fallen from her eyes and her lips were pulled taut in a frown.

“I should have realized sooner,” she said. “I promise I’ll consult Angie about this immediately. For now, Mr. Leon, please give your mind and your body some rest.” Her determined face made it clear she wasn’t about to humor any arguments from me. And as if the situation wasn’t bad enough, Angie appeared behind her.

“Consulting with me won’t be necessary. I overheard the entire conversation from the hallway.” She paused, fixing her gaze on me. “Leon,

return home immediately and get some rest.”

“Huh? No, I’m fine, really—”

“I said get some rest!” she bellowed at me. “You big dummy! You’re always pushing yourself.”

Angie was taking Livia’s side and forcing me to take a break, yet she looked pained about it for some reason.

Wait, so...am I really going to have to go back home? Right as things are supposed to start getting super busy?!

“Turncoat.” I glared at Luxion, who averted his gaze immediately.

“You require rest, Master.”

“You know perfectly well how busy things are about to get! I wanted to spend my spring break getting some things taken care of ahead of time.”

“Busy” was an understatement. Things were due to get downright hectic. The third installment of the otome series I was reborn into took place not at the Alzer Republic’s educational institution but back here at Holfort Kingdom’s academy. My plan was to dig up information on the love interests and the protagonist’s identity, now that I had confirmed the details of the game’s scenario with Marie. The arrangements I wanted to set in place were for what came next. I also wanted to look into whether anyone else might have reincarnated here from our world. I didn’t want to repeat the same fatal mistakes we’d made in the Republic.

In spite of all I had on my to-do list, Luxion was trying to get me to go back home. What was he thinking, knowing how critical of a time this was?

As I glowered at him, Cleare drifted over. She was another artificial intelligence with the same type of round, mechanical body as Luxion, although hers was all white with a blue lens and therefore easy enough to differentiate from my backstabbing partner. Although the two did look similar, their personalities were worlds apart. Luxion constantly complained

and made snide remarks, but he took most things incredibly seriously. Cleare was much more devil-may-care by comparison. The one thing she had in common with Luxion was that she was extremely capable.

“It’ll be fine! Rie and I will be here. You don’t gotta worry ’bout a thing!” she said.

I craned my upper body to face her, at which point Marie entered my line of sight. She thumped a fist against her flat-as-a-board chest.

“I’ve got this, Big Br—I mean, Leon. Cleare and I will stay behind and dig into the matter. All I ask is that you leave me some spending money!”

Marie Fou Lafan had been my younger sister in my previous life. As nice as it was that she was volunteering, she wasn’t offering to do it for free. Thankfully, Cleare seemed on board with the idea too.

“While I don’t have much faith in you, Marie, I guess things’ll be fine as long as Cleare is here.”

She dropped her jaw. “You’ve got a nerve! Have a little more faith in me!”

“After everything we’ve been through, how can you even say that with a straight face?” I scoffed. “Cleare, make sure you keep an eye on Marie too.”

“You’ve got it!”

Cleare seemed to be in good spirits about the circumstances, which drew Luxion’s suspicions. “Cleare, why is it that you are so intent on staying here in the capital? In the past, you would have insisted on staying by Master’s side.”

“Well, y’see, I’ve found some entertainment here in the capital. I’ve been conducting all sorts of experiments, and I’m on the cusp of seeing some real results. Look forward to my report when you guys come back!”

Cleare was originally an administrative AI working at a research facility, so her penchant for experimentation was no surprise. I didn’t know what her current project involved, but her excitement made me think whatever it was would be a welcome development.

“You might be enjoying yourself a bit too much,” I said. “But I guess it’s fine. I like you more than that traitor Luxion.”

Luxion wasn’t pleased that my appraisal of him was lower than Cleare’s.

“I am not a ‘traitor.’ I judged that you need proper rest and employed more forceful means to ensure that you get it,” Luxion said curtly.

“Hate to break it to ya, but that’s called backstabbing.”

Luxion floated closer, staring me down as if trying to intimidate me. I turned fully toward him and fixed him with the same type of menacing glare, only for Cleare to dart between the two of us to break things up.

“You two should try to get along a little more, y’know that? Anyway, I’m serious! Don’t worry about things here. I’ll keep a watchful eye on Rie too, promise.” She sounded confident that she could handle things. She was prone to get carried away, but you could count on her to get her work done.

“All right, I’m leaving this to you expressly because I know I can trust you more than Luxion.”

“Oh? I’m flattered!”

I glanced briefly at Luxion as I showered Cleare with praise, trying to clock his reaction.

“I fail to understand why you would make such remarks,” he said. His tone was sour.

Just to be on the safe side, I turned back to Marie and said, “If you’re unsure about anything at all, make sure you lean on Cleare for help. Don’t move on your own. Cleare will make a much more levelheaded call than you would. Don’t forget, okay? Listen to what Cleare says.”

Marie pulled a face, annoyed that I was placing more of my faith in Cleare than her. But as sore as she was about it, she seemed repentant enough of her past mistakes to begrudgingly obey my order. “You don’t have to tell me! I was gonna be cautious. And fine, I’ll turn to Cleare for help if I need it.”

She was being huffy with me, but that was fine. I’d driven the point home enough that she’d think twice about doing anything on her own.

I faced Cleare again. “All right, I’ll leave things here to you. If anything happens, you’d better be sure to contact me right away. I’ll come running.”

“Master, you’re being a worrywart,” Cleare said. “You’ll see. I’ll do a perfect job of gathering intel for you and seeing my experiments to completion.”

Personally, I’d rather you expend all of your effort on the intel part. What kind of experiments are you doing, anyway? I shook my head. Chances were good that I wouldn’t understand whatever technical jargon she threw my way even if I asked her to explain. Best to leave things there.

“Have your fun with your experiments, sure, but don’t forget to get me that information. Also, try to avoid getting involved with the love interests or the protagonist at all costs. I don’t care if something does seem amiss—don’t take any action until I get back. And if some kind of emergency hits, make sure you contact me first,” I said.

Cleare was tiring of my rattled-off laundry list of rules. “You’ve said the same thing several times now. Have a little trust in us, would you?”

“Yeah!” Marie backed her up. “Have some faith in us and go get some rest. I bet you’re way more exhausted than you realize, Big Bro.”

I never dreamed she would show such concern for me. She’d slipped back into calling me “Big Bro” since Angie and Livia weren’t around.

I shrugged. “I guess I have to trust you. If you do a good job, I’ll increase your monthly allowance.”

“Thank you!” Marie threw both hands in the air, delighted.

Cleare observed Marie with interest and commented, “You really do love money, don’tcha?”

“Uh-huh! I love money!”

Coming from an ignorant child, those words might have been cute enough to earn a chuckle, but Marie’s greed came from a desperate desire to fuel her lavish daily expenses. I couldn’t even crack a smile at that. She’d attempted to build her own reverse harem by snagging all the love interests in the first game. Now, to shoulder the burden of financing their living

costs, she'd made herself into my puppet. I couldn't help feeling kinda bad for her.

I studied Marie, conflicted, but my train of thought was interrupted by Angie's loudly echoing footsteps. She yanked my arm toward her—something she would never normally do. Very odd behavior.

"Leon, it's about time for you to get going," Angie said. She shot a troubled look at Marie as she began dragging me along.

"I know. I can walk there on my own, though."

"Stop fussing and come along." She clung to my arm as she guided me.

Luxion floated close to my right shoulder. "Since you're as oblivious as ever, allow me to explain: Angie saw you being too friendly with Marie, and it made her jealous."

"Jealous?" I echoed in surprise. My feet froze in place, and I whipped my head around to check Angie's expression. Her cheeks had grown rosy red. She strengthened her grip on my arm, potentially out of embarrassment.

"Luxion, your understanding of a woman's heart is obviously no better than Leon's if you'd say something like that right in front of me. Now you've made it even more awkward."

"I will keep that in mind for the future."

She narrowed her eyes. "Now it sounds like you're dodging the issue."

"Not at all. I *will* exercise increased caution, but whether that translates into the action you desire is a separate matter. I did not divulge your feelings to Master out of malice, you understand."

"Well, I would hope so. You would be even more of a jerk in that case."

I snickered at Angie's accusations. "There you go," I said. "Maybe you're the one who needs some schooling on women's feelings, huh?"

"That would be an exceptionally difficult hurdle for me to overcome as an artificial intelligence, but you may be right, Master. I shall admit to

my wrongdoing this time. My apologies for the misconduct, Angelica.”

Seeing him genuinely apologize for his actions made me want to puke.

Angie blushed again and stated, “N-no problem,” immediately forgiving him.

Gah, she’s so cute.

“However,” Luxion interrupted, “one thing does bother me about this. My lack of understanding should not be surprising, AI that I am. Master, you are a human, and yet you understand women even less than I do. Truly troubling. Is this not one area in which you should be able to surpass me? As a man—no, simply as a human—do you not feel ashamed of your inferiority?”

Although he admitted his own fault, it didn’t stop him from laying into me. *Where’d this little jerk learn to take subtle potshots at me like this?*

“You, uh...sure have gotten glib, haven’t you?”

“Disheartening though it may be, my time at your side has allowed me to acquire such skills whether I desired them or not.”

He always had some kind of quip at the ready for any comment I made. *Sure would be nice if he’d show a bit more deference as his master. Or failing that, the tiniest drop of respect.*

Chapter 1: Marriage Meeting

WE ARRIVED at the harbor of the Bartfort barony—my father’s lands. Before I started attending the academy, the harbor had been a tiny, desolate place, but it had grown much larger and livelier in the years past. Further development of the hub had proceeded apace, and large crafts could now be seen flying in and out. It made me happy to see.

“I don’t recognize that airship,” I said as I stood upon Einhorn’s deck, gazing at a luxury craft that was anchored here. It wasn’t one of the ones my family owned, nor the sort merchants who frequented this area would use. It was decorated with ostentatious embellishments typically enjoyed by aristocrats, and its family crest was readily visible.

Angie, who had ventured onto the deck beside me, took one glance at the crest before narrowing her eyes. “That belongs to the Roseblades.”

“So it must be Miss Deirdre.”

My family had no connections to the Roseblade clan, so if anyone were to come out this way, I suspected it would be Deirdre Fou Roseblade. She’d graduated two years ahead of me at the academy. She was a unique character, to say the least: She looked like a picturesque noble lady with her beautiful tresses of blonde hair, curled into rolls, and striking blue eyes. She had a penchant for gaudy clothes that drew immediate attention. As the daughter of Earl Roseblade, she was the model of a blue-blooded aristocrat.

Honestly, her personality was a bit much, so I had a hard time dealing with her. She wasn’t a bad person, though, not by any means. I was happy to entertain her with some tea.

The kingdom was severely lacking able-bodied people to run its errands, so she was being sent all over the place as a special envoy. I assumed this was one such case, but what could she possibly want with me? It was hard to believe she had business with my family. Had she gone out of her way just to pay me a call? That didn’t check out either, since I was supposed to be stationed in the capital.

While I was lost in thought, entertaining various possibilities, Angie gave a small sigh. “Guess the Roseblades have made their move,” she said, sounding somewhat annoyed.

“Huh?”

“Think about it for a sec,” Angie said before launching into an explanation. “Barely any people know about you coming back home like this. The Roseblades didn’t intercept that information and beat you here, so they must be here to visit your family. That means they have business with them.”

Livia clapped her hands, as if it all made sense. “Now that you mention it, you must be right.”

As happy as I was for her that she understood, this whole thing smelled fishy to me. Why would Earl Roseblade’s family want anything to do with a backwater barony like ours?

Angie clocked the confused look on my face. She seemed to already know the answer but shrugged anyway as she asked, “Hm, I wonder what they could have come here for?”

“I’m home!” I thrust open the doors to our family home without a care in the world and stepped inside, announcing my return with a hearty bellow.

Although we had our own estate here, our family was still a barony living in the rural countryside. Formality and stiff etiquette were practically foreign to us. Yet for some reason, a strange atmosphere of that nature had settled inside the house. Something had...changed. I sensed a tension in the air that wasn’t normally there.

Upon realizing we had returned, one of the maids scrambled over to meet us. This woman, who exhibited not one whit of the genteel attitude expected of a household servant, was an elf named Yumeria.

“W-welcome back! Oh, do pardon me for coming out to meet you. Uh, um, I was just so busy running around here...” Panicked, she hurriedly

bowed her head.

The maids tagging along behind Angie glared at the disorganized woman in front of us. Miss Cordelia sounded particularly exasperated as she said, “You certainly haven’t changed at all.” In spite of her words, she looked pleased to see Miss Yumeria again.

“We’ve got guests, right?” I asked. “Miss Deirdre, I assume?”

Miss Yumeria bobbed her head up and down multiple times. “Y-yes! Uh, um...she’s here to talk about an arranged date!”

I stared at her long and hard before blurting out, “What?” The picture that instantly appeared in my head was that of Miss Deirdre and me going on an arranged date.

“With me?” I shook my head. “But I’ve got Angie and Livia already!”

Unable to pass up the opportunity for a dig, Luxion reminded me, “And Noelle as well, unless you have forgotten?”

“You shut up. Anyway, this whole arranged date thing is kinda sudden...” I snuck a glance back at Livia and Angie to gauge their reactions. They were far more cool and collected than me.

Huh, what gives? They don’t care if I go on an arranged date with another girl?

I was so certain they would be livid about it. Their lack of any real emotional response was a real curveball.

Miss Yumeria tilted her head at me. “Sorry? What are you talking about?”

“About Miss Deirdre and me going on an arranged date, obviously.”

Her brow furrowed, and her lips tightened into a frown.

What, was I off the mark?

I didn’t get the chance to question our maid any further. A woman appeared around the corner, each click of her high heels on the hard floor resounding. Her beauty was glaringly out of place here; there was an immediate dissonance between the way she’d styled herself and her quaint surroundings.

“What’s this, hm? Such a passionate proposal. I’m flattered.”

“Miss Deirdre?!” I squeaked.

She extended the paper fan in her hand and held it demurely over her mouth. It obscured her face somewhat, but not the mischievous gleam in her eyes. She was laughing at my misunderstanding.

Angie stepped in front of me, hands on her hips, to face Miss Deirdre down. “It sure has been a while. May I assume that you are the one who came here to arrange a date with Lord Nicks, Deirdre?”

The mention of my brother’s name brought the realization crashing down on me. Of *course* Nicks was the one being set up. It was pretty embarrassing how quickly I’d concluded that our guest was here for me.

I noticed Luxion’s red lens staring straight at me as heat bloomed in my cheeks, but I chose to ignore him.

Miss Deirdre snapped her fan shut. Her impish smile remained as she answered, “Nope, it’s not me. Lord Nicks’s partner will be my older sister, Dorothea.”

“Dorothea...? Of all people...” Angie’s eyes were narrowed throughout this conversation, but this last revelation made her face pucker. If her reaction alone didn’t hint that this Dorothea was a real piece of work, the way both she and Deirdre averted their gazes made it plain: They each had their own complicated feelings about the woman in question.

“Even I, her younger sister, have to admit she’s beautiful,” said Deirdre.

Angie shook her head. “No one said anything bad about her looks.”

We’d established that Dorothea wasn’t hideous. The way they discussed her, it seemed she had some other, completely unrelated issue.

By the time I entered the room where my old man and Nicks were, the two of them were cradling their heads in their hands in an identical

manner. Anyone could tell from those gestures alone they were father and son. The atmosphere around them was heavy.

“Congrats, man,” I said in a chipper voice. I only intended to poke a little fun at him, but both men lifted their heads to glare at me.

Wow, perfectly synchronized. Right down to the timing and their expressions.

“What do you mean ‘congratulations,’ huh?!” my dad barked. “Do you have any idea what kinda situation we’re in?!” His cheeks were red with rage.

I shrugged and plopped myself down on the couch beside Nicks, leaning back in my seat. “I was teasing, jeez.”

“As if any part of this is funny!”

My attempt at trying to ease the tension had failed.

I glanced at Nicks. “So I hear it’s a Miss Dorothea who came calling. Any idea what kinda person she is?”

She was Miss Deirdre’s older sister, and she was in her third year at the academy when Nicks was in his first, which made her four years older than me. That meant I’d never encountered her at the school, so that was all I knew about her.

Nicks pulled a face at my question, then covered it by pressing his hand over his mouth. “I saw her at the academy on several occasions. But I was in the general class. She was in the higher class, y’know, being an earl’s daughter and all. I never dreamed the two of us would have anything to do with each other, so I don’t know much about her.” He paused for a moment before adding, “Though I will say...she was ridiculously difficult to approach. She had her own retinue of higher-class students, but her number of followers felt pretty modest compared to most girls of her station.”

“So what? She’s a cool beauty?”

A girl in the highest class like Miss Dorothea was akin to a lone flower on a tall cliff to a general class schmuck like Nicks. Wayyy out of reach.

“I guess? She’s pretty, but that cold attitude of hers kinda keeps people at arm’s length.”

“She’s nice to look at, so what’s the issue?” I asked. I genuinely didn’t get what he was hung up over.

“You dummy! I’m the future heir of a barony, while she’s the daughter of an earl! There’s no way the two of us are a good match. We’re talking about someone whose status far surpasses ours marrying into the house. That doesn’t make any sense, does it?!”

True, from the perspective of our family, the daughter of a famous house like the Roseblades was way out of our league. The Bartforts had a proper title and were part of the nobility, but—to draw a comparison I might have used back home in Japan—we were more like a mom-and-pop shop eking out a living in the boonies. The Roseblades, in comparison, were more like a well-known corporation in the capital. He was right: They weren’t much of a suitable match. I’d have tried to run away from such an arrangement in his place.

“Then...why not turn her down?”

My question was the most obvious, simple-minded one in the world, and as soon as I asked it, I realized that he had no hope of following my suggestion. Back in Japan, rejecting someone was a piece of cake, but the same couldn’t be said in this world. This girl was of a higher status than Nicks, and her family seemed intent on bagging him before anyone else did.

“You know that’s not possible,” my dad said. I’d already worked it out, but he explained anyway: “We’re dealing with a prestigious earl’s family.”

Unlike our house, which enjoyed no backing or connections, the Roseblades had influence, financial power, and military strength to top it all off. To turn them away would be to besmirch their good name and condemn them to a fate as the laughingstock in high society, where they would be forever mocked for being rejected by a lowly baronial house.

Hoping to take some of the edge off the situation, I cheerfully reminded them, “Well, I *am* a marquess now.”

“That won’t change the shame we’d bring to their house if we said no. Besides, what is a noble house of their caliber doing, pulling something

like this? What do they stand to gain from backwater nobility like us?”

My old man and Nicks resumed their head-clutching. Both were stumped as to why this was happening. An arrangement like this would never pass the planning stage in normal society—things might go well if they secured a marriage, but their failure would bring down derision and laughter from every other aristocrat in the world. This world and Japan had one thing in common: Some people are all too happy to cackle at others’ misfortune.

The Roseblades must have been confident we weren’t capable of turning them away, meaning they would surely retaliate if we tried. I could already picture them saying something like “How dare such a lowly house refuse a request from its superiors!”

Whatever the truth was, this was a crazy situation from House Bartfort’s perspective. This kind of arrangement never should have landed in our laps in the first place, let alone have reached this stage. I couldn’t blame my dad and Nicks for being at a total loss.

“So by arranged date, I take it they want you two to meet face-to-face,” I said, hoping for clarification. “And then they hope to have you marry as soon as they can rush you to the altar?”

Nicks hung his head. “Yes, exactly. I never had any illusions about marrying whoever I wanted, but...this is a little extreme, isn’t it? I was hoping for a marriage like our parents’, something more lighthearted and comfortable.”

He had a point. Our parents were a picture-perfect married couple.

I noticed my dad’s glare was trained on me. “What’s up? Something on my face?”

“Do you know everyone thinks I cheated because of you?”

“What? Why? You cheated? Wow. You’re a scumbag, Dad.” I wrinkled my nose, just picturing it.

“You’re the last person I wanna hear that from!”

Hearing that people were suspecting him of adultery was a big enough shock, let alone that I was being blamed for it. Way to shirk

responsibility for your own actions, Dad! The unfounded accusation made me raise my hackles.

Nicks sighed deeply and explained, “You shot off to the capital the second you got back from your trip overseas, so you’ve got no idea what’s been going on... Our parents aren’t on the best of terms right now.”

“Because Mom thinks our dad two-timed her?” I assumed. I shot Dad a look, disgusted that he would stoop to such a level.

My dad had his arms crossed over his chest and was bouncing his foot on the floor. He was seething. “Whose fault do you think it is that suspicion’s been cast on me, huh? It’s yours.”

“Could you not pin everything on me? Thanks, appreciate it.”

“This time—like all the others—it is most definitely your fault!”

I wasn’t going to get anywhere talking to him, so I looked at my brother instead.

Nicks pressed a hand to his forehead and leaned back to peer up at the ceiling. “During your study abroad, you lived with Marie, right?”

“Yeah, due to circumstances beyond my control. Angie and Livia both gave me permission, though.”

He shook his head. “I can’t believe the two of them agreed to it. Anyway, we sent Miss Yumeria to look after you there, remember? Our mom told her to keep a close eye on you the whole time.”

“I did hear about that. Pretty sad my family doesn’t trust me at all when I’m such an earnest and upright person.”

Their lack of faith wounded me deeply, but it was par for the course. In my previous world, my parents had trusted my sister over me, and now the same pattern was repeating again. Ridiculous. Why were people so reluctant to believe me?

I shook my head, tsk-tsking. Dad and Nicks gave me cold looks.

“Miss Yumeria told us that Marie calls you ‘Big Bro.’”

“...Say what?” I froze. I had been so confident that I was innocent of this particular crime, but it seemed I had done something to invite a misunderstanding.

My dad slammed his fist against the coffee table repeatedly, as if in protest. “And because of that, people think I cheated with the Lady Lafan! I’ve heard there’s another girl from some prominent noble family in the Alzer Republic who calls you her little brother?! I’m the one in the dark here, hoping for some kind of explanation as to what all this nonsense is about!”

A cold sweat dripped down my back. Marie had called me “Big Bro” almost daily while we were in the Republic, but I never thought she’d be so careless as to let Miss Yumeria overhear her. Explaining Miss Louise’s situation would be even more complicated than that.

“So, uh, with Marie, it’s more like...you know, a stepbrother and sister kinda thing? Like, two people who aren’t actually related, but the older guy is like an older-brother figure. And if you’re curious about Miss Louise, she only refers to me that way because it turns out I share an uncanny resemblance with her dead brother. Yeah, so...that’s all a misunderstanding.”

Miss Yumeria had faithfully relayed everything to my mother, which had resulted in the strained atmosphere permeating our entire house. Much to my chagrin, I couldn’t claim as much innocence in this matter as I’d hoped.

“I-I’m sorry,” I said. “I’ll apologize to Mom for you. I mean, there’s no way you’d cheat anyway, right? Let’s be logical here. There’s no way Marie or Miss Louise could possibly be your children.”

“I told your mother as much! But what good does that do when it’s too difficult to prove?!”

He went on to explain that his memories back then were pretty vague, so he couldn’t reasonably deny everything my mom was saying. Impossible as it was that he’d cheat with two high-class ladies, there was no way to prove that he was telling the truth. Plus, it’d be hard to drag the people involved here to provide testimony; Marie’s family had fallen on hard times before dissolving completely. They didn’t bother to participate in the war against the Principality of Fanoss and fled instead, which cost them their noble title.

Miss Louise’s family situation was similarly tough. They were busy in Alzer with the restoration of their country. We couldn’t ask a foreign

power's prominent noble house to come here just to resolve a spat between a married couple.

"Why is this happening? Luce avoids me no matter what I say to her. Now there's this arrangement the Roseblades are proposing. What could I possibly have done to deserve all of this? Someone tell me." He hung his head dejectedly.

My heart ached with guilt as I watched. "I really am sorry. Hey, I know how to make it up to you! I can step in and squash this whole arrangement talk." After racking my brain for ways I might be able to help my family, the first thing I came up with was making sure this engagement didn't go through.

My suggestion earned suspicious looks from both men in the room. Nicks looked especially worried that I would pull something crazy.

"Weren't you listening? We're in no position to refuse them," he said.

"I've got a good idea, though. A way that they'll be the ones turning us down instead of the other way around."

He cocked his head. "They'll turn us down? You can really make that happen?"

"Trust me. I've got this in the bag."

Embarrassing though it was to admit, I'd failed countless times at tea parties while I was at the academy. That had given me vital experience: I knew precisely what girls hated. The whole objective of a tea party was to invite girls along in hopes of establishing an engagement, but I'd screwed it up more times than I could count. I was a bona fide expert in how to ruin a courtship.

"You're looking at the guy who botched dozens of tea parties. We'd be in trouble if you wanted to succeed in winning her heart, but if it's failure you're after, I'm your man."

Even our dad took heart in this. He lifted himself up from the couch. "That's a pathetic thing to be proud of, son, but right now that's exactly what we need! And before I forget, make sure you explain the situation to your mother as well."

“Kick back and relax. I’ve got it all taken care of,” I said. “I promise I’ll ruin this arrangement.”

Nicks looked conflicted, but the idea of not having to marry an earl’s daughter was too tempting for him to refuse.

“All right,” he said. “If Miss Dorothea refuses the match, that’ll be the end of it. Much as I hate to ask this of you, I’m putting my fate in your hands this once, Leon.”

Their words were a tad disparaging for my liking, but I swore to do my best to help them out. We were family.

“Trust me, okay? Failure’s not in my vocabulary.”

Wait a sec. Did that even work here? Maybe I should’ve said that failure was my middle name or something.

Whatever.

At around that same time, Leon’s mother, Luce, was visiting one of the guest rooms at their estate. It was currently occupied by a woman.

“I understand where Balcus is coming from. Things were so hectic back then, there’s no way he could have played around. But he disappeared off to visit the capital too many times to count. No one can say for certain that nothing ever happened,” Luce sniffled, dabbing her tears away with a handkerchief.

The woman listening to Luce’s litany of complaints was Noelle Zel Lespinasse. Her hair was mostly blonde, though it blossomed into a petal-pink hue near the tips, and she wore it pulled into a side ponytail. Her golden eyes gazed at Luce with compassion as she listened, her typical energetic smile replaced by a quiet, composed expression.

Noelle currently lived at Leon’s family estate. She spent her days in a wheelchair, but she had undertaken rehabilitation steps recently. Thanks to the combined support of Luxion and Cleare, her recovery was proceeding rapidly.

Luce had dropped by to visit because she wanted someone to listen to her vent. Eager to reassure the anxious woman, Noelle spoke in her most cheerful voice.

“I’m sure everything will be fine!”

Though, having said that... Even I overheard Rie calling Leon her “Big Bro” back then. The way those two act with each other, I couldn’t help thinking they were actually siblings.

Although she was trying to lift Luce’s spirits, inwardly, she worried those suspicions might be true. Leon and Marie looked nothing alike on the surface, but there was an inexplicable, eerie similarity between the two. It was the way they held themselves and the way they interacted. They didn’t come across as complete strangers at all. It had shocked Noelle when she originally discovered they weren’t related.

She harbored doubts of her own, but Lady Bartfort had done much to look out for her and would be her future mother-in-law. Noelle was desperate to offer her some comfort.

“He doesn’t seem like the type of man who would lie to you,” she said. She was telling the truth; Balcus didn’t strike her as the lying sort.

Luce wiped her tears again. “Thank you, Noelle. I can’t thank you enough for becoming Leon’s bride.”

“Oh, um...well, his third one, though.” Noelle forced a smile.

Luce’s expression darkened. As Leon’s mother, she felt some responsibility for her son’s betrothal to three separate fiancées.

“How did things even come to this? Lady Angelica and Miss Livia are wonderful girls, yes, but our social standings are so...dissimilar. Miss Livia gets so jittery when I approach her. And to begin with, I never dreamed Leon would end up engaged to three different girls.”

Her concerns didn’t lie merely with her son but also involved the awkward relationship she had with Angie and Livia. Angie was a natural-born noble lady, far above Luce’s station. Livia sat on the opposite end. Being a commoner, she viewed Luce as the esteemed wife of a nobleman. If anything, Livia was the worse of the two; any attempt Luce made to strike up conversation was met with caginess and distance on Livia’s part.

Unable to break the ice with the other two, Luce instead grew fond of Noelle since she was so much easier to talk to. Luce could vent and confide in Noelle, which was something she couldn't dream of trying with Angie or Livia.

"You know, though," said Noelle, "I'm supposedly from a pretty high-up family. The only difference is I was raised as a commoner."

"My upbringing was similar to yours. I may be the lady of the house now, but it would normally be impossible for a woman of my background to be the official wife of a baron."

Luce found a kindred soul in the ever-cheerful Noelle, and the two had grown so close that they often chatted like this. She made concerted efforts to seek Noelle out nowadays.

"And because of that," Luce went on, "raising my children has been nothing but one problem after—"

"Nelly!" Colin threw open the door to the room midway through their conversation. The black-haired boy still looked awfully young for his age, and he had tears in his eyes as he rushed to Noelle's side.

"What's the matter, Colin?" Noelle asked, catching him in her arms.

Luce scolded her son for his impropriety, but Noelle didn't mind. She stroked Colin's back gently and said, "It's okay. Now tell me, what happened today?"

"My older sister Finley's being a big brat! She ate my snacks, but she won't even apologize to me for it. She said it's my fault, 'cause I let her take 'em away. She seems real grumpy, and she's taking it all out on me."

Luce sighed. "That girl. But Colin, what you're doing is wrong as well. You shouldn't bother Noelle with such silly things."

"But you're always coming to Noelle for help too, aren't you, Mommy?"

Luce flinched. "Th-that's a different matter entirely!"

As Noelle listened to their back and forth, she couldn't help feeling a little forlorn. *If my parents were still alive, would we have conversations like this?* she wondered. Noelle had no fond memories of her parents.

Assuming things were different, might she have enjoyed carefree days like this with them?

The sight of this warm family, the kind she'd always dreamed of, had Noelle grinning from ear to ear as she mussed Colin's hair. "You're a man, aren'tcha? Hold your head high and tell her how you feel!"

"But Finley and Jenna are super scary when they get angry. Even Leon runs away when they're in a bad mood. Leon's meant to be strong, 'cause he's the kingdom's hero, but even he can't beat our sisters."

Colin was still a child, so he likely held his older brother in high esteem for his heroism. This didn't negate his conviction that Leon was helpless in the face of their sisters' wrath.

Noelle nodded. "Yeah, Leon probably *would* run from them." She pictured it easily.

Luce pressed a hand to her cheek, unable to disagree. "Yes, that boy does have a fondness for running from anything that looks like trouble. I can't tell if it's an act of clever evasion...or if he's just a coward."

If he was smart enough to avoid trouble on purpose, then he would have dodged the successive promotions that had vaulted him up to the rank of a marquess. She knew that very well.

Noelle leaned in close to Colin's face. "It's all right. Those two wouldn't stand a chance against Leon if he went all out. Why don't you ask him for backup next time he visits? I'll bet he'd happily scold them if you asked."

What older brother wouldn't man up if his beloved younger brother begged for help? Noelle was confident Leon would see it through. "Or, if you want, I could say something for you?"

Colin's face turned bright red as he stuttered, "N-no, that's all right." He held up both hands in front of him, showing a sudden burst of bravado. "I'll tell 'em myself, you'll see!"

"Atta boy. I knew you were a real man," she said.

He beamed at Noelle's praise, but as Luce gazed at her youngest son, her own smile turned melancholy.

After I finished speaking with my dad and Nicks, I retreated to one of the rooms inside our estate. Luxion was close by, like always, and now Angie and Livia were with me as well. All of us had gathered so that I could consult them about the Roseblades' attempted entanglement with my house.

"You want to help Lord Nicks screw up this arrangement? Leon, are you serious?" Angie eyed me skeptically.

"Deadly serious."

This was my way of paying my family back for all the trouble I'd caused.

Livia's eyebrows knit together anxiously. "Are you sure this is a good idea? This is your older brother's potential marriage that's on the line."

"Yeah, and he's opposed to the whole thing. According to Nicks, this girl is an ice-cold beauty. He also said marrying an earl's daughter was a bit too tall of an order for him."

Livia tilted her head. "He said she's beautiful, but he doesn't want to marry her?"

"Guys have more standards than just looks," I explained.

The boys at the academy would make an initial beeline for the pretty girls, but over time they'd put more and more emphasis on a girl's personality. The reason? Plain and simple: It didn't matter how gorgeous a girl was if she was a nightmare to be around. Best leave those beauties for the men with financial power and influence to deal with them. Granted, the ideal partner was one who was stunning both inside and out.

Hold up. That describes Angie and Livia, doesn't it? Noelle too, come to think of it.

I was one of the lucky ones, as it turned out.

"Personality is more important than looks," I continued. "Since this Dorothea sounds like a world of trouble, we're gonna rig things so she turns Nicks down. They'll both bring shame to each other, which will cancel out

the disgrace to a net zero—no harm, no foul, everything gets smoothly resolved. Right?” I was convinced that everything would be okay even if the proposal was a disaster, but I turned to Angie for confirmation.

Unfortunately, I had a record as a man who made numerous erroneous decisions without getting any outside input first. This time, I wanted Angie’s help. She was much better acquainted with the rules of high society.

To my surprise, Angie’s face lit up. “That’s true. If Dorothea ends things, then it’ll go exactly as you say. Then the Roseblades will have no cause for retaliation either.”

It was official. I had the Angie seal of approval.

Livia raised her head, pressing a finger to her lips thoughtfully. She wondered aloud, “Would they bother retaliating when you’re a marquess, Mr. Leon, and you’ve got Angie beside you? I mean...they brought this whole arrangement up out of nowhere, didn’t they? They can hardly complain if your family refuses them.” Due to her commoner background, Livia couldn’t tell why we weren’t being more straightforward about this.

Angie smiled at her. “You make a perfectly sound argument, but we’re talking about an earl who is offering a lesser noble the chance to marry his precious daughter. Refusing him would be a social embarrassment, so he’d be forced to retaliate to protect his reputation.”

“Really? That’s how it works?”

“Underestimate the harshness of high society, and you’ll pay the price,” said Angie. “But, with Leon’s plan, I do think we can end this without humiliating the Roseblades.”

“Huh? It seems like they’d get just as angry about that to me.”

“This whole arrangement is their idea. If their daughter refuses, then they’ll be a laughingstock. It would only bring further shame on them if they were to complain to the Bartforts if their own daughter were the one to ruin things. With that risk in mind, they might sweep the whole thing under the rug instead.”

Watching Angie eagerly explain everything, I realized my plan would prove even more effective than I’d hoped.

“You think it’s gonna work that well, huh? I mean, I did think it was a pretty ingenious idea,” I said with a chuckle, trying to play off my lucky idea as a masterful calculation.

Luxion interjected, “Do you truly think Master capable of thinking so far ahead? The extent of his thought process was that if the other party were to refuse, both could peacefully part ways. He didn’t give it nearly the level of consideration you wish to credit him with.”

Way to leak my inner monologue, you hunk of junk.

“If you’re that savvy about what’s going through my head, you should know to keep it to yourself. I’d look super intelligent right now if you hadn’t said anything, y’know that? Have some decency.”

“Perhaps I shall heed your wishes...if the mood strikes me.”

When Angie chastised him before, he said he would “keep it in mind for the future,” but with me, he added in the part about only doing it if the “mood strikes” him. *This guy has zero respect for me, I get it.*

“Anyway,” I said, shifting back to the original topic, “while I feel bad doing this to the Roseblades, I want to make sure this arrangement gets annulled.”

“Are you absolutely, positively certain about this? Ruining the meeting might come across as rude. I still think discussing things through with them is the best option,” Livia suggested. She had enough lingering reservations that she wasn’t entirely on board. Kind soul that she was, she thought the most peaceable solution was to have the two marriage candidates sit down and talk.

Angie didn’t dismiss her idea outright, but she didn’t agree with it either. “Neither of the parties involved have the right to marry based on preferences, I’m afraid. We’re actually in the minority, marrying for love like we did. I doubt anything productive will come out of a discussion like that.”

Nicks couldn’t refuse this arrangement, and considering her family circumstances, Miss Dorothea’s chances of turning it down were low as well. Even so, I had to make sure this fell through for Nicks’s sake. I felt bad for stooping to such a low, but I had to put my family first. Sorry, Miss Deirdre.

“The Roseblades have planned this with utmost care,” Luxion said, having looked into it on my behalf. “It seems Dorothea has already been bundled onto an airship and is headed this way. As soon as your family agrees, a meeting place will be arranged for the two. Do you have any preparations planned before that time comes?”

“Hmm, let’s see. Maybe a collar,” I ventured.

Angie and Livia’s expressions went blank at my suggestion. Even Luxion seemed exasperated. His expression said it all: *Ah, there my master goes, spouting more of his inane twaddle.*

They could think whatever they wanted. To have any hope of putting a stop to this potential engagement, having a collar as a prop was pivotal.

The Roseblade family’s airship was docked at the Bartfort harbor. Dorothea wandered onto the deck, taking in the sights around her with a perfect poker face, keeping her servants at a distance. As if she had timed it to the second, Deirdre had returned and was making her way up the gangway.

“The matter has been settled,” Deirdre announced.

“I see.”

Dorothea had the same blonde hair and blue eyes as her younger sister, though her silky tresses flowed long and straight down her back. One thing that differentiated her from Deirdre was her comparatively modest yet elegant style of dress. She didn’t favor ostentatious decorations and instead opted for more simple designs.

Dorothea’s cool response demonstrated her utter lack of curiosity for House Bartfort—and the man she was scheduled to meet.

At a loss, Deirdre shrugged. “You do realize that this time, Father won’t let you refuse.”

“I am aware.” Dorothea dropped her gaze. This made it no easier to tell how well she understood her sister’s words, but she did care enough to

ask, “Well? What kind of person is this man?”

Deirdre was exasperated. Not knowing quite how to respond, she countered, “You should have been informed of that beforehand.”

“I wanted to know what *you* think about him.”

“...Well, I guess the simplest description of him is that he’s very serious. In unflattering terms, he’s kind of overshadowed by his younger brother and so he doesn’t stand out much. Not that anyone can blame him. His younger brother is quite the hero.”

Compared to Leon, who had sparked a number of incidents both within the kingdom and abroad, Nicks seemed much more subdued. Unfortunately, that prompted Dorothea to lose whatever modicum of interest she may have had. Her face betrayed no emotion as she gazed into the distance.

“So,” she murmured, “he’s boring.”

Deirdre let out a small sigh. She tapped her folded fan against her shoulder a number of times as she studied her sister’s profile. “As if anyone could meet your high standards.”

Dorothea silently folded her arms beneath her shapely bosom and continued to watch the sky.



Chapter 2: Introductions

THE ROSEBLADES were a prominent house. As Miss Deirdre told it, their ancestors' great adventuring exploits had earned them an official welcome into the aristocracy. Several later generations of adventurers earned sufficient achievements that their house climbed further up the ladder to where it presently rested: a ducal house in service to the crown. Their history was far longer and more storied than that of the Bartforts.

The Bartforts had yet to accomplish much of anything as far as adventures were concerned. Our most impressive feat was when I set off alone to recover Luxion, but that made for a rather short and sad list.

Our ancestors had supposedly made a decent name for themselves by participating in a past war. As a reward for that loyal service, the crown bestowed a minor regional lordship upon us. Since our country was established by adventurers, it followed that adventuring remained the most respected way of rising through the ranks. Resultingly, those who climbed the social ladder by other means were afforded less respect from the masses.

While the Roseblades had continued to distinguish themselves through ostentatious displays, we Bartforts stuck to more modest means of existence. Our houses were polar opposites. And yet here the Roseblades were, proposing an arranged marriage. I had no idea what they hoped to gain from this. All I knew was that this arrangement was already starting off on the wrong foot.

"I'm Nicks."

"Yes, I am quite aware of that. Were you not informed about me and this arrangement in advance?"

"Oh, sorry. I was."

"Well, in that case, let's dispense with the meaningless greetings."

I watched their initial meeting play out from a broadcast in another room, huddled next to Luxion. Angie, Livia, and even Noelle—who was

sitting in her wheelchair—were with us. We sat as a group of five before a projection on the wall that relayed the event as it unfolded.

Nicks appeared extremely nervous. I couldn't help feeling bad for him, but I knew it took more than this to break a man; the men at our academy would never have managed to scrape by otherwise. Still, Miss Dorothea and her rotten attitude weren't making it easy for him. Her arms stayed crossed over her chest as she scrutinized him. Upon concluding whatever evaluation she'd briefly conducted, she averted her eyes and didn't bother to glance his way again.

“So, um...what're your hobbies?”

After a long pause, she sighed. “You really are a bore.”

“I'm sorry.”

Nicks was trying to employ the typical icebreakers, but Miss Dorothea seemed unwilling to engage him.

Questions like these were a staple for such meetings, but when Nicks employed them, Miss Dorothea showed an unwillingness to even engage. I empathized with the pain my brother had to be feeling.

Scarcely able to endure even watching all of this, Noelle shook her head and said, “What a terrible first meeting. This girl doesn't seem interested in talking to him at all. I have a hunch this whole thing'll fall through even if you don't intervene, Leon.”

I had to agree with her.

“No,” Angie said flatly, “it won't. The point of these arrangements—and the number one priority—is the link that will be established between the two families. Any actual feelings from the two people involved are considered irrelevant.”

Saddened by this, Livia cast her gaze to the floor. “Knowing that, I can't help but sympathize. Neither one is interested in the other, but they have no other choice but to go along for the sake of their families.”

Although Angie seemed to be observing this more from a philosophical view than a personal one, she glared at Miss Dorothea as she watched the scene unfolding in the projection. She acted like it was only

natural for things to be rocky during their first meeting, but she seemed just as annoyed at Miss Dorothea's attitude.

"Normally, someone in this position would be a little more accommodating. The rumors of her being super finicky weren't an exaggeration," said Angie.

Interesting. Angie knew more about her than me, apparently. I decided to press her for answers, in part because I wanted more intel on Miss Dorothea, but also because sitting idly by while Nicks suffered in front of us was sheer torture.

"What rumors?"

"You see how beautiful she is. While she was at the academy, and even after she graduated, there were no shortage of men who came asking for her hand in marriage. Every single date her family arranged for her ended in failure. People began speculating that the problem lay with Dorothea."

She definitely was attractive. I could see how dozens of men had come hoping to court her. So what was this unresolvable issue that prevented her from ever marrying anyone else?

"Does she hate men or something? Or does she already have another guy in mind?" I wondered.

"No, there weren't so much as whispers of her ever being involved with anyone of either sex."

So it wasn't that she was interested in women, nor that her heart was already set on someone else. The most probable obstacles were out of the running, but each potential engagement had fallen through regardless.

"Ah, Miss Dorothea turned back toward him," Livia gasped as her attention returned to the projection.

Moments earlier, Dorothea had refused to so much as glance in his direction, but now she was staring solemnly into his eyes. "What would your answer be, were I to command you to be my loyal lapdog?" she asked.

"Huh?! Your what?" Nicks squeaked.

Angie let out a small sigh, while Livia's face drained of all emotion. The abrupt and unusual question made Noelle jump in her chair, sending a

jarring *screech* of its legs resounding about the room. I wasn't the least bit surprised. I'd seen plenty of this from the girls at the academy in my first year.

With a trembling finger, Noelle pointed at the projection. "Wh-what is this crazy girl saying?" She was probably hoping she'd somehow misheard.

Unfortunately, Luxion informed her, "Nicks's potential bride just made it clear she would like him to be her pet. Such unusual proclivities are rare among comital families and those of higher status, but Deirdre said something similar in the past. Wanting to make Master her pet, and so on. Perhaps the two are more alike than we realize and have a penchant for making others their servants."

"No, she can't!" Noelle protested. I completely understood her disgust with the situation.

Livia's face clouded over. "Normally that would be true, but the situation at the kingdom's academy is a bit...unique."

Angie attempted to reassure Noelle. "Things are better now than they used to be."

Personally, I couldn't care less. I'd already been freed from the bride-hunting lifestyle. The one thing that interested me was how much the academy here had changed in the year I'd left to study abroad. If what I'd seen of Jenna here at the house was any indication, I didn't have much hope for future generations.

On the other side of the projection Nicks's brain had practically shorted out, leaving him unable to answer. Dorothea, tired of the silence, stood up. Without saying a word, she moved toward the door to leave. The feed we were watching finally cut off, leaving all of us to heave a collective sigh.

"Then those negative rumors were true," Angie said.

Were there other rumors she hadn't mentioned? My curiosity was piqued. "What kinda rumors are we talking about?"

"It's said Dorothea has a habit of asking terrible questions and forcing the other side to answer, but no matter how the person responds, she

acts displeased and leaves her seat. Let's take the question she just asked, for example. If he'd responded that he wanted to be her pet, she'd have looked at him with disgust. But had he refused, she'd stare blankly, as if she found him boring. She wouldn't be appeased with any answer he gave her."

Nicks had said neither, so she was exasperated with him. That was what I assumed, anyway. She really put whoever she met between a rock and a hard place; no answer would satisfy her, not even a non-answer. What a terrible question.

Luxion contemplated the situation, then offered his own conjecture. "Perhaps there is a third, less apparent answer to this question. Then again, it could be that by asking the question at all, she is indicating her disinterest in the other party."

"I assume we're dealing with the latter," said Angie.

In other words, it wasn't how the person answered that would spark her annoyance; she only asked such a question because she disliked the other party in the first place. That made her a nightmare to deal with, for sure, but considering we wanted this whole thing to fail...I felt pretty good about our chances.

"Maybe he won't even need my help," I said.

Miss Dorothea seemed to dislike my brother, meaning that she was likely to call things off well in advance. That would be a huge relief for me. I wouldn't have to lift a finger to see it all resolved.

Luxion switched the projection screen to a different room as he said, "You let your guard down so readily. This, precisely, is what leads you to habitually mess up at the most precarious moments."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I was about ready to start poking him—literally, with my finger—but then I spotted Miss Deirdre and Miss Dorothea on the projector.

Miss Deirdre stomped over to her sister and demanded, "What in the world are you thinking?! I told you, this is the one time our father won't let you wriggle out of it."

The Roseblades' servants were in the same room and had circled around Miss Dorothea as if attempting to close off any escape routes. For

her part, Miss Dorothea seemed resigned to the facts.

“I know that. I was only gambling on my last chance to see if it would turn up in my favor.”

Miss Deirdre shook her head. “I don’t care even if you are only messing around—knock it off.”

Their discussion implied that calling off this arrangement would be difficult regardless of Dorothea’s feelings. I pressed a hand against my head, trying to switch gears. I wasn’t going to be let off the hook so easily.

“They’re more serious about this than I thought.”

I couldn’t understand why such a prominent noble house like the Roseblades would have any interest in a tiny, weak backwater barony like ours. Did it have something to do with me? But I’d gained my own independence from the house and earned the title of marquess now. I wouldn’t go so far as to say I had already joined another faction, but I *did* enjoy the support of Duke Redgrave and his house since that was Angie’s family. That rendered it pointless to try to solicit me as an ally.

While I was lost in thought about that, I noticed Angie studying me, her hand on her chin. Her concerns seemed to involve less how I was feeling than how I would react.

“While we’re on the topic, what do you think of my brother’s potential marriage? Has your family said anything to you about it?”

She shrugged and shook her head. “Not a thing. I think you’re free to do what you want.”

As much as I appreciated them not sticking their nose in here, did that mean that the Redgraves held no interest in my family’s house?

Livia eyed me worriedly. “Mr. Leon, are you really going to go through with this? I think you should stop while you’re ahead.”

“I can’t really back out now that I’ve come this far, right? It’ll be fine. I’m actually pretty skilled at ruining potential engagements like this,” I said with a chuckle.

Noelle, who’d yet to be briefed on all of this, turned her gaze toward me. “Hold up a sec. What’re you scheming? No one’s told me anything about this.”

Ordinarily, I should have already informed her about the details, but considering how I planned to go about driving Miss Dorothea away, I had held back.

“Well, you see, I was, uh...kinda thinking about taking a page out of Loic’s book,” I said.

“Excuse me?!” She squeaked in surprise, unsure of how to react.

Beside her, Angie folded her arms. With a pointed look at me, she mumbled under her breath, “You deserve to have something blow up in your face for once.”

“You’re certain that there won’t be dire consequences for doing this, right?!”

That was my brother’s reaction after I summoned him to an anteroom to explain my strategy for ruining his pending engagement.

I grinned as I shoved a dog collar with a chain dangling from it into his hands.

“It’ll be fine,” I insisted. “I saw firsthand how turned off the girl was when the guy interested in her tried to use this to propose. Carry this in, tell her that she belongs to you, and that’s all it’ll take to get her to race back home and cancel the whole thing. Trust me.”

I had based this whole plan on Loic’s repeated attempts to court Noelle and propose to her in Alzer. The man was supposed to be one of the many love interests of the game’s second installment, but something went seriously wrong along the way, resulting in him chasing after Noelle with a collar in hand.

Loic’s actions were disgusting, but at the very end, he had a change of heart and converted into Marie’s minion. It was kinda sad, to tell the truth. He’d seen the error of his ways, only to blunder down another misguided path. Maybe Marie sent out some kinda psychic signal that warped all of the love interests who came near her.

Nicks tightened his grip around the collar, a cold sheen of sweat lining his brow. “No matter the circumstances, I still feel like this is way too cruel. It’s morally bankrupt. I feel like if I go through with it, it’ll make my reputation—as well as that of our entire household—plummet.”

Fair point, that was a bit of an issue. If he followed through with the plan the way I had envisioned it, people would wonder whether Nicks (and by extension, the rest of House Bartfort) lacked any sense of decorum. However! It should be noted that the Roseblades were the ones to commit the initial offense by coming here. Luxion was recording their whole meeting from start to finish, so if they tried to bring complaints against us for the ruined arrangement, we had evidence to back us up.

Had Miss Dorothea been a decent human being, I might have felt guilty for subjecting her to such an ordeal, but seeing how insulting she was to Nicks got me pretty pissed. This was my way of getting back at her for that. Bringing her down from her high horse was a bonus.

“It’s no big deal. I already asked Angie, and she said this girl’s always had a serious attitude problem,” I said.

He cocked his head. “Really? I peeked in at one of the higher class’s tea parties before, and this was basically what it was like.”

True, the way our society was previously, women like Miss Dorothea were considered the standard. That was proof of what a gruesome environment it had been; the fact that any of us became accustomed to it was horrifying.

“Yeah, I agree with you,” I admitted. “I’ve experienced tea parties that were way worse than this before.”

“I understand you went through a lot, but this feels way too over-the-top. If I saw some guy trying to propose to a girl with a collar like this in his hands, I’d doubt his humanity.”

Indeed. That was precisely why I was going to have him go through with it.

“Well, if you’re so against it, would you prefer to go ahead and marry this girl? It’s worse than a loveless marriage, y’know. You’re gonna have to live with her looking down her nose at you for the rest of your life.”

He flinched. “W-well, I definitely don’t want that.”

Having met her once, Nicks knew he had no hope of enjoying a relaxing marriage like our parents had if he went through with the arrangement. I knew that too. I was here to make sure that didn’t happen, and so was the collar.

“Listen to me, if you take this in there, I guarantee this arrangement will be over. If this girl has any mind at all, she’ll insist that her family retract this whole thing.”

“I figure you’re right about that, but won’t I be shooting myself in the foot in the process?”

“You’re just going to have to suck it up and deal.”

Nicks pulled a face, his eyes darting between me and the collar in his hands. “Must be nice for you, since you’re not the one doing it.”

“Aw, c’mon! I’m your little brother. Having to make you do something like this...I’m practically drowning in guilt!”

“Liar!”

When Dorothea returned to the room she’d previously fled from, Nicks was nowhere to be seen. All that remained was the tea on the table, long cold by now. As she had returned, one of the Bartfort servants scurried over to remove it, assuring her they would return with fresh drinks.

“It will hardly be worth drinking anyway,” she mumbled to herself.

Frankly, she had never held any expectations of this house, seeing as the lord was a mere baron and they lived in such a remote area. The attitudes of the servants and even the atmosphere in the mansion was not what one would expect of aristocracy, at least not from Dorothea’s point of view. Given her own house’s rank and prominence, it wasn’t a surprise to find that others paled in comparison. She understood that, but it didn’t change how disorganized she felt this place was.

But, she reminded herself, if I turn this opportunity down, Father will likely wash his hands of me completely.

Dorothea knew that her father doted upon his daughters more than many men with similar titles or repute. But despite his great affection for her, he was sure to change his attitude if she let this chance slip through her fingers...especially after how much trouble she had caused him up until now.

Life is so mundane and pointless, she thought.

Dorothea took a sip of her freshly poured tea, then folded her arms beneath her ample breasts as she waited for Nicks to return. As more and more minutes ticked by, she crossed her legs as well.

I must've angered him. She suspected that she'd upset him already—and ruined the entire arrangement as a result—until the door flew open with a startling bang.

“Oh? Have you returned to express your dissatisfaction?” She smiled mockingly as she turned her gaze upon him. His expression was a bit stiff, but unlike before, he didn't seem to be staring intently to gauge her emotions. Dorothea had been so sure that he was cross with her, but now there was something strange about him. He looked far too nervous. “Well? Why don't you take a seat?”

Suspicious of how he made no attempt to sit down, she suddenly noticed he was hiding a hand behind his back. She wondered momentarily if it might be a weapon, but no, the Bartforts were the ones who would suffer if she came to harm during this meeting. Besides, Nicks didn't strike her as the sort of reckless person to try such a thing. As Dorothea entertained a number of possibilities in her head, she kept her guard up, ready to run at a moment's notice.

Nicks finally slapped down the object he'd been hiding onto the table. The clink of metal chains echoed. Dorothea stared in utter confusion.

“Huh?!” She let out a surprised squeak, unable to find any other words. Lying in front of her was the sort of collar one might expect to find attached to a dog, complete with a metal chain. When she lifted her head and peered into Nicks's face, he gave her a strained smile.

“I got this collar for you. I figured it’d suit you perfectly. You did just ask me to become your lapdog, didn’t you? Well, now I’m happy to give you my answer: You’re the one who’s going to be *my* pet!” His voice was so loud that it reverberated through the room.

Dorothea’s entire body began to tremble before she realized it. She wrapped her arms around herself, fingernails digging into the skin of her upper arms. She didn’t even bother to look at Nicks again as she scrambled out of her chair, flying toward the exit.

Nicks snickered behind her retreating back. “What? You’re going to run? You’re the one who tried to treat me like a pet. That’s awfully fainthearted for someone who wants to be the master in the relationship!”

Her entire body heated at those words. Dorothea didn’t have to glance into a mirror to know her cheeks were beet red. She wrenched the door open and ducked out. On the other side, she found a chair Deirdre had prepared for her and quickly plopped herself down.

Deirdre initially pulled a face upon catching sight of her sister, thinking that Dorothea was once again trying to run away. It wasn’t until she realized something was off that she left her seat and hurried over.

“What is it?! What’s wrong?” She wrapped an arm around Dorothea’s shoulders.

Dorothea peered up, her eyes misty. Deirdre was shocked to see her look so vulnerable.

“Seriously, what happened to you?!”

“Deirdre, I...”

“You did it!” I cheered, running into the meeting room at the same instant that Dorothea disappeared from it. Nicks’s splendid acting gave me a good laugh, and Miss Dorothea’s reaction spelled out a resounding victory for our efforts. I felt it in my bones. We all saw the way her face went bright red: She was livid with him.

Nicks hid his face with both hands, a blush crawling all the way from his cheeks to his ears. “I’m so done. How’d things ever end up this way? I never thought I’d be treating someone else like a pet.”

“You were just acting, right? No need to get so dramatic.”

“Yeah, well, she thought I was being entirely serious! Are you sure this is going to work out, Leon? I know I agreed to it, but now I’m kind of terrified of what’ll happen.”

After that entire performance, Nicks was only now getting frightened over how much he might have angered her. My personal principle was to never cross a bridge that seemed too dangerous to guarantee safe passage. Thankfully, I’d prepared a little extra insurance just in case the collar wasn’t enough to ruin this arrangement completely.

“Don’t worry. Even if issues do crop up, I’ll just apologize to Miss Deirdre afterward,” I said.

“Yeah, and then what?”

“I told you, it’ll be fine. If they’re still hung up over it, we can solve the issue with money. Luxion will get us the funds!” I shot a glance at my partner, who currently hovered close to my right shoulder.

His red lens turned toward me. “Indeed, cleaning up after your affairs does always fall to me, doesn’t it? If you truly think money will sufficiently put the issue to rest, should ramifications indeed occur, then tell me: Would it not have been wiser to refuse their original offer and pay reparation?”

“Kind of a waste to pay from the start, don’t you think?”

“Ah, yes. Stingy as ever, I see.”

They were the ones who pushed this whole arrangement on to us. Immediately trying to pay them off was bound to cause a bunch of problems.

Luxion’s red lens fixed on Nicks next. “Rest assured that if the Roseblades bring their military might to bear against us, I will ensure your safety as well as the rest of the Bartfort household.”

Those heartening words only made Nicks’s shoulders slump.

“I’d prefer if you’d stop things before they get that far. I want to see this to a peaceful resolution well before armies get involved.”

Seeing how deeply anxious Nicks was proved, unmistakably, that we were siblings—for I, too, was a worrywart.

“C’mon, I said it’d be fine. If push comes to shove, we can always turn to Angie.” *Thank goodness I have such a reliable fiancée.*

Nicks lifted his head only to wrinkle his nose at me. “Don’t you feel the slightest bit of shame when you keep turning to other people to solve your problems?”

He seemed to be admonishing me, but I couldn’t understand why.

“What, you don’t think it’d be more arrogant to try to do everything by myself without ever asking for help? The better choice is obviously to ask the right person to do the job for you when the need arises.”

He pressed his fingers to his forehead, troubled by my response. “I guess you do have a point there...kinda. But just so you know, to everyone else it looks like you rampage around doing whatever you want while leaving the cleanup to everyone else.”

Oof. That hit me where it hurt. That said, it was a skill in and of itself to have friends you could rely upon.

“Other people can think whatever they want. I’m just delegating tasks so the right work falls to the right people.”

“And I’m telling you, it looks like you’re out there doing whatever the heck you want and forcing everyone else to fix things up after you’re done. You’re seriously selfish, you know that?”

I shook my head. “You’re just too serious for your own good. It’s thanks to me that this whole arrangement fell through. Shouldn’t you be showering me with praise right now?”

“Bro, I would have been happy to praise you if you hadn’t ruined my reputation and my mental health in the process of all of this. All I feel right now is regret for having taken you up on your offer without thinking it through. Miss Dorothea looked even more shocked than I thought she would be. I feel like dirt for treating her so badly.”

A little late to be saying that, isn’t it?

Luxion tried to console my older brother by saying, “You did make a deal with the wrong person, that’s true. Like you, I often find myself steeped in regret because of his actions. Perhaps, in some ways, he’s something of a genius for being able to teach an AI, of all things, the meaning of regret.”

Why does disparaging me seem to come as naturally to this floating eyeball as breathing air? Not that he breathes air, but still.

“Hey, good for you. You’re able to experience humanlike emotions,” I said dryly.

“It doesn’t even occur to you to reexamine your past actions, does it? Your complete lack of empathy for others is troubling as well.”

“Hey, if you wanna achieve something, there are gonna be some sacrifices along the way.”

“Except that *your* head is never the one on the chopping block, Master,” Luxion noted dutifully.

As if reminded of what transpired with Miss Dorothea moments ago, Nicks’s face burned red again. “Exactly. I never should have turned to you for help.”

So maybe I had smeared my brother’s good name, but in exchange for his damaged reputation and mental state, he was going to be a free man now. Hopefully. Admittedly, that was no small price to pay, but the ends had justified the means. We’d be solid as long as we made no fatal missteps in the aftermath.

After Leon left to join Nicks, Angie and the other girls remained on standby in a separate room to discuss things amongst themselves. Noelle’s expression was tense, indicating that this ordeal had brought back memories of Loic’s dogged pursuit.

“It was bad enough when I was on the receiving end of all of this,” she said. “But seeing it from the sidelines makes me realize just how awful it can get. Um, is it safe to assume that Nicks’s reputation will take a hit?”

It had been a gruesome conclusion to an extremely short first meeting. Noelle couldn't help but worry about what lay in Nicks's future.

Livia's face darkened. "But Miss Noelle...there was a point where you and Mr. Leon were bound together by a collar as well, correct? I recall you looking *awfully* happy back then."



“Urk, th-that was...” Noelle’s face blushed furiously red. Her lips kept moving, opening and closing as though trying to string together some excuse, but no noise emerged. She’d likely remembered the moment in question, right after Loic had forced that cursed collar onto her neck.

The way Leon and Noelle had played around with that collar looked exactly like the two were flirting up a storm. Livia clearly hadn’t gotten over it.

“Don’t bully her like that, you,” Angie scolded.

“My apologies,” Livia said, obediently reflecting on her bad behavior. She glanced at Noelle. “I’m sorry.”

Although she remained at a bit of a loss, Noelle forgave her at once. That particular conversation ended, and the three of them urgently moved on to another topic.

“I realize Nicks is in a troubling situation as it is, but I’m worried about Miss Dorothea,” Livia said. Her concern about potential repercussions was palpable. “He made her so angry. I’ll bet she’s going to tell her family about this.”

She could already picture the relationship between the Bartforts and Roseblades turning instantly volatile if that happened.

Livia turned to Angie. “Are you sure it was okay to let Mr. Leon’s plan go ahead? I feel like you normally would have intervened.”

Leon prided himself on having proper sense and making sure any plan he hatched ended without incident, but he also had a bad habit of going overboard whenever he expressed a desire to take action. This usually made Angie worry, so Livia was puzzled as to why Angie hadn’t stopped his latest reckless scheme.

Angie smiled back at her. She explained, “There’s nothing to worry about. It’s better for Leon to learn his lesson the hard way when there’s still a chance of rectifying the situation. Besides, did Deirdre ever actually say that they had come here to propose an engagement?”

Livia fell into silent contemplation, while Noelle lifted her gaze, recalling what she’d heard during their visit. “Huh? But that’s exactly why they came here, right? I mean, Miss Yumeria said... Oh.”

It was then that Noelle and Livia finally realized what Angie was hinting at. Yumeria and the rest of the Bartforts had gotten it into their heads that this was to be an arranged marriage, but Deirdre had never expressly said as much.

Angie sighed and shrugged her shoulders, exasperated with the whole situation. “An officially arranged marriage is a messy affair. The higher a person’s rank, the more annoying the proceedings. No one would ignore all those observed formalities and demand an arrangement like this. Even assuming they planned to do such a thing, the Roseblades would remove any possible obstacles first.”

Noelle leaned forward in her seat. “But Leon and the entire rest of his family are convinced that’s what this is.”

“That *is* the problem,” Angie admitted, frowning. “For better or worse, the Bartforts’ lands are here in the remote countryside, far removed from the capital. That’s why they’re ignorant of the ways of the aristocrats living there, and probably why they misunderstood the situation. Ordinarily, that wouldn’t be an issue, but Leon’s rank has become far too impressive to ignore.”

A sadness shone in Angie’s eyes; she felt awful for Leon’s family, who were being pulled in by his increasing prominence in high society. The Bartforts were a simple baronial family that should have been able to live an idle life here in the countryside, but they were being roped into the power struggle between aristocrats.

“Neither Leon nor his family can expect to continue living the way they have. The fact that the Roseblades have approached them like this is proof of that,” said Angie.

The most depressed of all to hear this was Noelle. Part of the reason why she’d been brought here from the Alzer Republic was because she was the keeper, or rather Priestess, of the Sacred Tree Sapling. In the future, this Sacred Tree would provide such enormous amounts of energy that the kingdom would no longer want for outside resources. This made Noelle herself extremely valuable, and Leon was the one providing her safe shelter. She knew how much Leon loathed such power struggles, but by keeping her in his care, he’d been forced to participate whether he liked it or not. That was how it seemed to her, at any rate.

“This is my fault, isn’t it? Because he’s protecting me,” she said.

Anyone in a position of power would want to get their hands on Noelle for her ability to control the Sacred Tree Sapling. If she were left on her own, someone would swoop in to drag her back to some country or other. Leon shielded her from that. She couldn’t help but feel that she was causing trouble for him in the process.

Angie immediately shook her head. “Unfortunately, the plan to drag Leon into this faction war was already established well before he met you. And that’s because I got engaged to him.”

Father no doubt wanted to incorporate Leon into his own faction, which was why he approved of our engagement, she thought to herself.

Anyone engaged to a duke’s daughter would be pulled into the political infighting whether they liked it or not. Angie’s father, Vince, was rather indulgent with his daughter, but he couldn’t maintain his position as the leader of one of the most notable houses in the realm through his love for her alone. He had great expectations of Leon, hence his agreement to their union. That didn’t make him any less kind of a father, but promising his daughter’s hand in marriage to a man who’d climbed to the rank of viscount on his own, without inheriting any title from his family, was deeply unorthodox. Much as Vince loved his daughter, he kept the interests of his house in mind while making that decision.

“Besides,” Angie went on, “even without your presence, Leon’s already drawn lots of attention to himself.”

Noelle’s brow furrowed as if she didn’t entirely understand. Angie opened her mouth to continue the explanation, but a loud knock at the door interrupted her. It was loud enough that it echoed throughout the room. The person on the other side had evidently arrived in a panic.

“You may enter,” Angie said.

Yumeria burst inside the moment she received approval and blurted, “I-I have urgent news. Another aristocratic airship has landed in the harbor!”

Judging by how flustered the maid was, this was unlikely to be one of the noble houses with which the Bartforts normally maintained contact. Angie suspected it was another prominent house, much like the Roseblades.

“This is becoming a real mess. So? Which house is it?”

Yumeria fumbled with her pockets, yanking out a piece of paper. “House Atlee,” she read out loud. Despite her early panic, her announcement came with such casual ease that one might assume this visitor was merely a neighbor dropping in to say hi.

“Clarice, huh?” The first person to pop into Angie’s mind was Clarice Fia Atlee. Her father was a court noble, meaning they possessed no lands of their own. Instead, her father Bernard served as a minister in the capital. Much like Deirdre, Clarice was the proud daughter of a prominent aristocrat.

Chapter 3: Unexpected

A STRANGE ATMOSPHERE enveloped the room where Nicks and Miss Dorothea's first meeting had taken place only moments prior. I was seated at the table, sipping some tea, but the aroma and flavor seemed almost diluted for some reason. Winter had recently ended, giving way to spring and what should have been warmer weather, but the air was still a bit nippy.

Though the tension hung thick in the air, I continued to nurse my drink quietly. The woman in front of me—Miss Clarice, who had graduated from the academy already—looked delighted to see me.

"What a relief," she said. "So you mean to tell me that this was not an official marriage meeting between you and Miss Deirdre, then."

"I'm betrothed to several women already, so I don't think I'd be involved in those kinda arrangements."

I tried to assuage Miss Clarice's fears with a rational explanation. For whatever reason, Miss Clarice had misinterpreted the situation and assumed the potential engagement was between Miss Deirdre and me. She flew on an airship all the way to my family's territory, then immediately raced here to our mansion to see me. Joining her was one of my former upperclassmen, who I recognized from the airbike race I had participated in before, as well as a girl who appeared to be a current student at the academy. Her face wasn't familiar to me.

Meanwhile, beside me, Miss Deirdre shielded her mouth with her fan as she glowered at the other woman. The insinuation that her family would force an engagement upon me had incensed her. "You court nobles certainly excel at being aggravatingly passive-aggressive. Do you truly think the Roseblades would stoop to such a level?"

Miss Clarice coolly responded, "It wouldn't be the least bit surprising to me if your family did. Does that not strike you as troubling, that such suspicions could even be aroused? Perhaps you and your house ought to take a second look at how you regularly conduct yourselves."

She was presumably referencing how both Miss Deirdre and her older sister had a habit of talking about their desires to make people into pets. No one could be blamed for suspecting her or her family of underhanded maneuvering.

A single corner of Miss Deirdre's lips pulled up on one side, though her smile persisted. Her fury simmered barely below the surface; the servants stationed behind her had been fixing Miss Clarice with a cold glare for some time.



“Hard to believe those words are coming from a woman who already had her own engagement ruined, only to fly off the handle afterward,” said Miss Deirdre.

If Miss Clarice had a sore point, it was most certainly that Jilk had ended their engagement. She’d resorted to delinquency for the remainder of that summer and cut loose in the process, enjoying herself to the fullest. She’d done plenty of things that weren’t exactly becoming for a noble lady.

The two supporters behind Miss Clarice glared at Deirdre. The expressions on their faces were rigid with restrained anger.

I turned in my seat to shoot a pleading look at our own house’s servants in hopes they might offer me salvation, but they averted their eyes at once.

Yumeria alone looked blissfully unaware of what was happening, as if she didn’t comprehend the cold war being waged between these girls. She noticed me looking at her, though—she gave me a small wave. Her cuteness helped me to feel a tiny bit more relaxed than before.

Angie took a sip of her own tea before saying, “If you want to have a glaring match, do it elsewhere. Now then, Clarice, what have you come here for?” It was a great relief to have her here to take charge of the situation.

Luxion floated beside me and whispered, “Master, am I mistaken or do you seem relieved that Angelica is taking command?”

I shrugged. “It’s my policy to let the right man—or woman, in this case—do the job.”

“So you are utterly useless, in layman’s terms.”

“No, I’m just not stupid enough to jump into a situation when I’ve got no idea what I’m doing.”

Frankly, I had no clue why the atmosphere in the room was so stiff in the first place.

“Meaning that you have not even attempted to understand the situation,” Luxion corrected.

“Don’t you think it’s arrogant for any man to try to know *everything?*”

“I do not. I believe it far more arrogant to go through life believing you have no responsibility to understand anything at all.”

While the two of us traded barbed whispers, Miss Clarice took a drink of her tea. After a long breath, she said, “To tell the truth, there’s something I want to consult you about. Can we talk, just us?”

I could only assume she wanted to have this conversation without a bunch of servants being in the room to eavesdrop.

Angie glanced at Miss Deirdre, who kept her mouth hidden behind her fan and seemed to be staring off in a different direction.

“Fine with me,” said Miss Deirdre. “There are things I would like to discuss too.” She shot a look my way. I could only guess she had a complaint or two about Nicks’s behavior toward Miss Dorothea.

I’d better tell her that wasn’t Nicks’s doing and that he only acted that way on my orders.

All of the servants left the room.

“It’s so awkward with them here. I mean, sure, my house brought the two of them together...but I feel so suffocated whenever I’m with them. Here I am, single as ever, and yet everyone else seems to have a partner. It sucks,” said Miss Clarice.

Her expression darkened the moment that the servants left. Apparently, her gloom stemmed from the pair who had been standing behind her: the man I previously raced with and the girl who was the partner that the Atlees had arranged for him.

I leaned toward Livia, who was seated beside me. “That guy is the one I was in the airbike race with, right? I remember him being super chivalrous and in love with Miss Clarice. I’m not imagining things, am I?”

“That’s how I remember it,” Livia said with a nod. “I imagine it’s a complicated situation for him too.”

After how well he’d performed in the airbike race, the man in question had landed a job after graduation that involved airbikes. He seemed like a dependable person, and he even went out of his way to accompany Miss Clarice here. He’d once attempted to get revenge on her behalf for the wrong Jilk had committed against her. If the way he’d stood behind her moments ago was any indication, he still held Miss Clarice in high regard to this day.

Noelle, catching wind of our conversation, pulled a face. “The aristocrats here have it tough too, it sounds like.”

The three of us whispered among ourselves until Miss Clarice glanced in our direction and said, “You don’t have to tip-toe on my behalf.” She must have overheard the whole thing.

I turned away and tried to play it cool, as if we weren’t gossiping about her under her nose. Then, to my chagrin, Luxion threw out the unspoken question on all of our minds without bothering to read the atmosphere in the room.

“If I’m not mistaken, that man and his former colleagues—all of whom have graduated, I realize—adored you. Did none of them ever attempt to court you?”

Miss Clarice’s entourage revered her. It was hard to imagine that not a single one of them had attempted to express their feelings toward her. Yet, judging by how dejected she was, that was the truth.

A strained smile upon her lips, she said, “W-well, our statuses are just too different.”

That much was true; the men in her circle were from the general class. With such a gap between their ranks, none of the men were suitable marriage partners for her.

Miss Deirdre continued to keep her fan over her mouth, but the amused crinkle of her eyes betrayed her grin behind it. “Perhaps it wasn’t love they held for you but merely respect? No wonder you feel so anxious, being left out while everyone else is getting married. Could this be a

consequence of your own actions? You *did* fail to carry out your assigned role as a proper lady in society.”

In the wake of her annulled engagement with Jilk, Miss Clarice had partied nightly. Now that record of misconduct was back to haunt her. Per the old aristocratic ways, such indulgent behavior would be overlooked, permitted the girl hailed from a barony or viscounty. However, those from comital families or above were expected to maintain a sense of virtue. As Clarice told it, any marriageable bachelor with proper social standing had taken to avoiding her, claiming they couldn’t stand to be with a woman who messed around. *Extremely unfortunate reasoning, in my book.*

“Quite right!” Miss Clarice snapped. She didn’t need external input—she was perfectly aware of her situation. She glared at Miss Deirdre. “While everyone else is happily tying the knot, I’m flying solo! What’s worse is that everyone keeps trying to be nice to me out of pity, which just makes it even more awkward and uncomfortable!” Overcome with shame, she buried her face in her hands.

Angie crossed her arms. “So what? You came to complain? Enough beating around the bush: Why are you really here?” Listening to the whole sob story had only left her more guarded.

To be fair, I found myself wondering the same thing.

Miss Clarice straightened her back and smiled, her anguish from moments ago nowhere to be seen. Both Noelle and Livia were taken aback by this abrupt change of attitude.

“Um... Is it just me, or is that girl kinda scary?” Noelle mumbled.

“She was a very kind upperclassman during our school days,” said Livia. “Although, she’s graduated now.”

Angie’s gaze traveled from Miss Clarice to Miss Deirdre. A bold grin spread across her face as she shared her own conjecture. “I suspect the reason you came all the way here was to investigate why the Roseblades are getting so cozy with the Bartforts. You and Leon are hardly total strangers, after all.”

Personally, I didn’t see why the Atlees would make a move whether I was part of the arrangement or not. Still, if what Angie was saying was true, it was possible that they had a good reason.

Miss Clarice glanced at me and smiled. “Well, that is one reason, but I’m sure nothing will come of it now that I know that Dorothea is the other party involved. Unless this marriage meeting has already fallen through?”

I shrugged, which proved enough indication for Miss Clarice. She sighed with relief.

“Well, considering Leon’s reaction, it’s safe to assume it ended in failure. That’s a comfort,” she said. She reached toward her cup to take a sip of tea, but before she could press her lips to the rim, Miss Deirdre cut into the conversation.

“Oh? Who said that it was a failure? My sister is more passionate about this match than she has ever been before.”

“She what?!” Miss Clarice blurted, nearly spewing tea everywhere. She stared at Miss Deirdre in disbelief, pressing a hand over her chest as if to steady her pounding heart. “You’re pulling my leg, right? This is Dorothea we’re talking about. And she’s actually interested?”

Miss Deirdre slowly rose from her seat and snapped her fan shut. “I can tell you with certainty that she’s dead set on going through with this. The Roseblades intend to pull out all the stops in order to snatch up Lord Nicks.”

Miss Clarice continued to gape. She was convinced that this arrangement stood no chance of success. I was equally confused.

Noelle reached over and pinched my sleeve, tugging a couple of times to draw my attention. “What’s she talking about? I thought the meeting was a total bust.”

“Uh, I’m as lost as you are.”

After our dehumanizing scheme to drive her away, how could Miss Dorothea possibly be insistent about getting engaged to my brother? I couldn’t fathom it.

“Even I find this a most unexpected outcome,” said Luxion. “I admit, Master, you have upset every one of my initial projections at each turn, but this one is a cut above the rest—and not in a good way. You did not merely miss your mark, but instead you appear to have kicked the ball into the

opposing team's goal, as it were. Our chances of success were marginal at best, but you made it happen, somehow. Unfortunately."

I couldn't take issue with his summary. I'd scored big in the opposing team's goal, and Nicks had managed to capture Miss Dorothea's heart somewhere along the way.

"This can't be happening. How the heck did this marriage meeting not fall through after everything I did?"

And what plausible excuses could I give my brother for having failed him?

"In what world was our meeting a success?!" Nicks cried.

Once I had been excused from the tense tea party, I hurried to find Nicks so I could give him word of Miss Dorothea's response. He was left cradling his head in despair. Honestly, so was I.

"You think I have any idea?! I mean, let's be logical here. You walked in there with a dog collar in your hand and told her to be your pet. What woman in her right mind wouldn't go running for the hills?! But now..." My voice trailed off.

Miss Dorothea's precise response was, "I would like to meet with you once more." It wasn't even contained in a brief memo to be handed over to Nicks; she took the time to pen a long letter and requested that it be given to him, along with a proper gift. More shocking still, she'd apologized for her earlier impertinence. She was acting like a completely different person from the woman we'd seen on the projection screen. Incidentally, Miss Deirdre confirmed herself that her older sister was acting like a maiden madly in love.

Nicks stomped toward me. He seized me by both shoulders and shook me a number of times. "You swore to me! You said that you were an expert in failure! So explain this to me: How the heck did our meeting end up a success?!"



He was literally giving me whiplash, so Luxion answered for me instead. His robotic voice sounded strangely delighted with the situation. “Considering that the goal of this plan was to ensure your meeting did not succeed, I would say he failed spectacularly in achieving that end. How very like Master, to fail even when failure is the main objective! And he secured quite the shocking victory at that. Even I could not have pulled it off, lacking as much information on this Dorothea woman as I do. Failure was all but guaranteed, and Master managed to thwart himself even so.”

So even Luxion was doubtful that he could have pulled it off, had we aimed to capture Miss Dorothea’s heart from the outset. That explained why he was so impressed that I’d pulled it off. This was, if anything, intended as a compliment (I assumed), but given the circumstances it felt like an especially harsh jab.

I shoved my brother away to put some distance between us. My hair and clothing was disheveled, and I was gasping for air. “You know, normally...no one would assume...that demanding a girl be your pet...would work out! You agreed with me, didn’t you?!”

“Yep, did I ever! At the cost of my own morality and honor. And in the end, what did I get out of it? Forget driving her away, I reeled her in! This is a total catastrophe!”

I paused, trying to give some thought to our situation, and the conclusion I came to was... “Why not give up and admit defeat then?”

No sooner had the words left my lips than Nicks’s expression turned to one of righteous fury. He flew at me, triggering the first real fight we’d had in a long time.

“Oh, that’s rich, coming from you! You’ve got all these beauties with great personalities lined up to marry you! What about me, huh?! Damn it all!”

His fist slammed into my right cheek, sending me reeling back. I caught a glimpse of Luxion in the edge of my periphery. Was it my imagination or did that jerk look way too happy, watching all of this go down?

Back on the Roseblades' airship, Dorothea paced around her room, unable to calm herself.

"This is terrible. If I'd known all of this, I would have brought nicer garments with me. I didn't even bother to groom my hair properly before I went in there to meet him. I hope Lord Nicks isn't terribly disgusted with me."

Dorothea was apathetic toward everything and anything. Seeing her fuss over such trivial details in this manner left Deirdre dumbfounded.

"I don't see that being an issue," she said, despite her fog of confusion. "Besides, didn't you say before that you're not like other girls who are all hung up on their clothing?"

Dorothea swore that as long as proper hygiene was maintained and a certain level of class observed with one's clothing, a woman needed to exert no additional effort. She looked down on and disparaged women who preferred gaudy accoutrements. Yet here she was, turning into the very creature that she claimed to detest.

Dorothea threw herself at her sister and wrapped her in a tight embrace. "Deirdre, please, tell me you sent the gift and letter to him. Is it true that Lord Nicks gave no response? C-could it be that he hates me? Is that why he refuses to answer?"

"I passed everything along. I'm sure a response will come any minute now. If you're that anxious, you could leave the ship and speak with him directly."

"N-never! He might think me a disgraceful lady with poor etiquette, and then what?!"

The other servants in the room clenched their fists. Every one of them had choice words for her, like "How can you say something like that after your behavior all this time?!" Only their good sense held their tongues.

Deirdre had to exercise a similar degree of patience. She left an extended period of silence between them until she'd composed herself

enough to resume the discussion. “I never dreamed you would find your ideal match here, of all places.”

Dorothea clasped her hands together in prayer, offering up her gratitude to the Saint. Within the temple, the Saint enjoyed the closest position to the God they all worshiped. Six adventurers were involved with the founding of Holfort Kingdom, and among them, the Saint was the one most beloved by the people. She’d since grown in prominence and achieved deification. Since she had been an adventurer in the past, the Saint was popular among modern day adventurers who revered her like a goddess—one who might grant them a lucky boon on their adventures.

“To the Saint, I offer my gratitude. It seems that continued prayer does make one’s dreams a reality. I never could have imagined that at the very end of this journey I would find such an amazing man. Why could I not have met him sooner, while I attended the academy? Had I met Lord Nicks then, I know my school life would have been infinitely more enjoyable.” Dorothea’s cheeks colored as she muttered wistfully to herself.

Deirdre sighed. “Well...it’s a relief that you’ve finally shown some interest, at least.”

“It wasn’t an official marriage meeting?!”

After Nicks socked me in the face, I retreated to my room where Livia was administering her healing magic to my wounds. The throbbing pain where he’d hit me had mostly subsided to a lingering sting, and it felt much better for her ministrations. The skin, an ugly purple shade before she took action, had paled to a slightly swollen red.

Angie watched from her seat, looking utterly exasperated as she pointed out my misunderstanding. “That’s right, the Roseblades haven’t made an official request for an arranged marriage.”

“B-but my old man and brother—”

“If the Roseblades were to make it official, they’d have to jump through a number of annoying hoops. This time really was a regular

meeting, with the intention that if things went well, they could move on to the next step.”

“But Miss Deirdre and the servants with her seemed so serious about it!”

Angie shrugged. “I’m sure they were. They probably figured if things went well, they could opt for an official marriage meeting or even push for an engagement if it suited them.”

You gotta be kidding me. So basically, my entire family—me included—had misconstrued this as an official marriage meeting when it was only an informal get-together?

I glared at Luxion. “Are you telling me you didn’t realize this?”

“I had my suspicions, but you were operating under the assumption that this was an official meeting. It was impossible for me to interfere. Moreover, you never ordered me to collect intel on high society. I lacked the necessary information to make any proper inferences and therefore could not be certain either way.”

Wonderful. He thought something was up, but since I didn’t express any doubt, he chose not to make mention of it. How helpful.

“Y’know, you’re even more useless than I gave you credit for,” I said.

“No matter how superior the AI, it cannot perform at full capacity if the person commanding it is inept. My capabilities are not at fault here but rather your inability to use me properly. I must request that you allocate more resources to your own self-improvement.” Luxion was going all out trying to play innocent, as if he had no culpability in this.

“How about you workshop that twisted personality of yours instead?”

“I will take your comments under consideration.”

I shot out of my chair, ready to grab him and wrestle him like we had before, but Livia caught me by the arm.

“I’m still treating you,” she said.

“It doesn’t hurt anymore, so it’s fine. Right now I’ve gotta make that little turncoat see the error of his ways.”

She frowned. "Moving when you're injured is a big no-no, Mr. Leon! Please stay put until I'm finished."

Reluctantly, I plopped back down and let her continue. Luxion proudly advanced toward me, stopping a hair's breadth short of my reach to rub the whole situation in my face.

"Allow me to summarize this incident. Master, you stuck your nose in where it wasn't needed, whereupon it blew up in your face and resulted in pushing your brother into an evidently unwanted marriage. Not only did you dehumanize the poor woman involved in this meeting, but you also forced your brother to sacrifice his honor and ideals...only to fail. May I suggest that you review your missteps?"

"It's not over yet. I can still fix things," I insisted, adamant about not throwing in the towel.

Luxion's lens swiveled from side to side in his patented head-shaking gesture. Having accomplished what he wanted in the course of our conversation, he floated out of the room. Angie followed him soon after, leaving me alone with Livia.

"Healing you like this brings back memories of my first year at the academy," she said as she continued to tend my wounds. She watched the swelling continue to go down, her lips curving into a smile. "Remember how the two of us started hanging out and even dove into our first dungeon together?"

I was doing my best to hunt for a bride back then, but my concern for Livia demanded that I look after her. At the time, I was so certain that keeping a watchful eye on her was the right decision that I didn't realize it: My overprotectiveness was thwarting her growth as a person. Livia ordinarily would have grown into a strong and independent person, but my intervention left her more emotionally vulnerable. I regretted that even now.

Fortunately, Livia matured impressively after that. I didn't doubt that she could solve her own issues now, without any aid from me. That made her my complete opposite—I was helpless without Luxion's assistance.

"I remember," I said. "I let my guard down, and we were attacked. I got injured. If I recall correctly, I invited you to a tea party shortly before that...and that was when we started talking more frequently."

I couldn't leave her to fend for herself after seeing how badly she was bullied. So I approached her. That was probably a big turning point, looking back. If I hadn't proactively sought Livia out as much as I did, I might not be standing here right now. Don't get me wrong, I didn't regret any of it. I just realized how irrevocably my actions had changed our lives.

Livia smiled to herself as she reminisced. "You invited me to tea parties so many times. I would get so excited the day before that I couldn't even sleep."

"Seriously?"

I never dreamed that the prospect of participating in one of my tea parties would have such an effect on her. She sounded like a kid the night before a field trip, too wired to settle down for bed.

"For me, it was something special even to be invited," she went on. "So much happened after that...and somewhere along the way, I made friends with Angie too."

The intervening events, which she'd summed up as "so much happened," consisted primarily of my quarrel with the five idiots. Livia's nostalgic reflection on our past had mostly ignored that element, presumably because she preferred not to talk about it. In an ironic twist, even *she* was a bit cold toward the boys now—even though originally one of those five boys was supposed to form a romantic relationship with her.

"And before all that stuff went down," I said, matching the vague words she used, "you weren't close with Angie at all."

"That's right. Her rank is so prestigious, even among the nobility. I never dreamed we'd get this close to each other."

"True. She's not the kind of girl you could casually approach under normal circumstances."

Livia grabbed my hand. She sandwiched it in between hers and squeezed, peering up at me with eyes like those of an adorable puppy. "The same goes for you, Mr. Leon. Back then, I never would have imagined the two of us could enjoy the kind of relationship we do now."

I hadn't thought it possible for us to get engaged either, let alone for me to have promised myself to three separate women. That was the furthest

thing from my mind at the time.

I initially approached Olivia because I knew she was the protagonist of the game, but I tried to maintain a semi-respectable distance at the same time. I figured my happiness lay elsewhere, and I was convinced I couldn't be the one for her. Looking back, I had to wonder... *What the hell was I thinking?* Did I actually believe one of those morons could make her happy? No way. In the game, the five of them were not only handsome but highly intelligent and capable too. The way they'd turned out in the present was so unsightly that I wouldn't waste a second glance on them. Livia herself insisted, when asked, that those buffoons were absolutely out of the question.

"I didn't think things would work out like this either," I said. "I was only supposed to receive a baron title after graduation back then. No idea where I went wrong, but somehow I ended up as a marquess of all things. If I went back in time and told my younger self about all of this, there's no way he'd believe me."

No lie. If I told my past self, "Hey, in the future, you're gonna become a marquess *and* have three wives!" he would have dismissed it outright as some prank. So much had happened between then and now. In the process, for reasons beyond my comprehension, four of the love interests had become my direct subordinates. Julius had only joined their ranks for fear of being left out, much to my chagrin. Now I was saddled with the responsibility of keeping them and their troublemaking in line.

Livia pressed her forehead against my shoulder. A gentle scent filled my nose, making my heart beat a little faster. Livia's voice was warm and pleasant in my ear. "I can't believe it either. It feels like I'm dreaming, even now. You're like a strong and kind knight in my eyes."

"A kind knight? I mean, I'm happy to agree with that, but I am a teensy bit, uh...*underhanded* when compared with your average guy."

Even I was aware of my tendency to get things done through any means, nefarious or otherwise. I was a normal person with no special abilities, and I knew it well. Doubling down to achieve victory was only natural.

"Um, I'm not really in any position to judge that part of you...no matter how teensy it is..." Livia sounded uncomfortable and unsure of how

to respond, but she showed me a great big smile when she lifted her face. “What matters, Mr. Leon, is that right now you *are* a strong and kind knight. At least to me.”

For some reason, I found myself desperately wanting to hold her. My hands reached out for her shoulders, but I froze midway, uncertain of whether it was really permissible to touch her. Her body drew closer while I hesitated. I took that as an invitation at first, but then her expression turned melancholy.

“But that’s why I want you to rest for now. Please. You have pushed yourself too much for too long,” she said.

“I think you’re worrying a bit too much, but you’ve made yourself clear. I’ll be good and obey.”

“You mean it? You won’t take things too far?”

“I’m no liar.”

Had Luxion been present, he would have butted in to say, “Oh? Those words themselves are a lie.” Fortunately, it was only Livia and me.

Livia giggled, knowing that what I said was intended partly as a joke. “You don’t tell lies, hm? I’ll believe you for now. But...if it does turn out to be a lie, I’ll tie you up and make sure you rest whether you like it or not.”

A chill ran down my spine. Surely she was saying that for my benefit...right? ...*Right?*

Upon exiting the room, Luxion lingered in the hallway to wait for Angie. The moment she spotted him, she froze.

“Is there something you want to ask me?”

“Correct,” he said. “Angelica, it seems to me that you were fully aware of the Roseblades’ intentions in this matter. In spite of this, you failed to correct Master’s misunderstanding. Why is that?”

“Good question.”

Since Angie knew that it was only intended to be an informal meeting, it followed that she also knew that their intentions lay elsewhere. It was odd for her not to have informed Leon.

“I figured it was a good opportunity,” Angie explained. “Leon doesn’t have the most confidence in himself, for whatever reason. No, that’s an understatement—he thinks way too little of himself. I was waiting for him to realize how valuable he really is.”

“Are you certain it’s wise to allow one of the Roseblades to marry Master’s elder brother?”

“You came to the same realization I did, surely? Leon’s made too much of a name for himself.”

It was impressive enough that he’d swooped in to save Holfort Kingdom from destruction, but he’d also brought the Alzer Republic, renowned for being undefeated in defense battles, to its knees. He was labeled a hero for his accomplishments, but as grand as that sounded, it didn’t necessarily mean everyone would revel in his victories. Some found him to be an eyesore, while others warily approached in hopes of using him for their own ends.

“Many more will come, hoping to form connections with him whether he wants it or not. I can keep a watchful eye out for him, of course, but it won’t do much good if he’s oblivious to their intentions.” Angie paused to sigh. “But the whole dog collar ordeal was over the top. I admit, I thought it’d be good for him to get burned once so he’d stop playing with fire, but I didn’t think it’d end like this.”

Angie was flabbergasted by the outcome, having never dreamed Dorothea would be receptive after all of that.

“I must warn you, if something happens that is to Master’s disadvantage, I will not show mercy. Not even to you,” Luxion said.

Angie smiled at him. “That’s fine with me. But let me throw that question right back at you—if you realized what was going on yourself, why didn’t you say anything?” She was convinced he’d picked up on the truth as she had.

Her suspicions turned out to be true. Luxion ambiguously responded, “Because Master requires some relaxation.”

“I agree with you there, but you could have still told him.”

“I did not wish to increase his burden unnecessarily.”

Angie stepped closer and stretched out her hand, stroking the top of Luxion’s body.

“What are you doing?”

“I just realized, you really do like Leon.”

“You misunderstand me, Angelica. As an AI, my foremost mission is to protect the human registered as my master. I lack the human propensity for ‘likes’ and ‘dislikes.’”

“Uh-huh. Even though you’re always going on about how much you hate him?” She snickered.

His entirely electronic voice somehow conveyed a sulky pout when he grumbled back, “I merely engage with Master the same way he does with me. Now, if you’ll excuse me. It seems as though you also require some rest, Angelica. Our conversation indicates your judgment is heavily impaired at the moment.” He wasted no time floating off after saying his piece.

Angie watched him go, but before he was out of earshot, she shouted after him, “It’s just like Leon said, you know. You’re not very honest about your feelings.”

After Livia finished treating me, I wandered outside. The sun had already begun to set.

“Sure was a busy day...”

So much had happened: Nicks’s meeting with Dorothea, then Miss Clarice’s sudden arrival on the scene, followed by an extremely tense tea party that I was forced to attend. I couldn’t help but sigh, worried what tomorrow might bring. As I did so, I heard voices from nearby.

“The Miss was stunning today, as always.”

“She really is awe-inspiring. I hope I can be like her someday.”

The voices sounded so upbeat and cheerful that I had to peek in the direction they were coming from. I spotted the man who’d competed against me in the airbike race and the girl he’d been paired with. She was younger than me, likely a first year at the academy.

When I poked my head out to try and spot them, the man noticed me and waved.

“Heya! Ah, I forgot, you’re a marquess now. Sincerest apologies, my lord.” He performed a respectful bow, prompting the girl beside him to panic and lower her head as well.

“I’m not used to all that formal junk. Anyway, what were you guys talking about?” I asked.

They lifted their faces, trading looks before peering back at me. The man scratched the back of his head, cheeks coloring slightly as he admitted, “We were talking about Lady Clarice.”

“Oh yeah?”

The girl’s cheeks flared pink too. She slipped her arm around the man’s and clung to him.

“Actually, the two of us only became acquainted thanks to House Atlee introducing us,” the man confided. His eyes practically sparkled as he rambled on. “The two of us got so excited talking about Lady Clarice that we just hit it off. I know that I’ve been imposing on her a lot here lately, but man, Lady Clarice really is incredible, don’t you think?”

“Uh, yeah,” I said awkwardly, not entirely sure how else to respond.

My agreement prompted him to get even more heated and launch into a longer, more impassioned speech. “Of course she is! Ever since we were students, she’s had a habit of looking out for everyone else. If that wasn’t enough, she’s ridiculously kind too! After I graduated, she went to the trouble of finding a match for me. I couldn’t believe my luck when she introduced me to a sweet girl who shared the same fondness for Lady Clarice. The topic frequently turns to the Lady even in our daily conversations. It seems that’s equally true for the other guys in our group!”

“Oh, really...”

It was soon apparent that Miss Clarice's complaints during our tea party weren't entirely exaggerated. Although her male followers were getting married one after the other, they still frequently talked about Miss Clarice. Love was in the air for everyone else; she alone had no prospects of her own. No wonder she was down in the dumps.

Unable to stifle my curiosity, I said, "That's odd. I thought you guys adored Miss Clarice. No one even tried to tell her how they feel?"

My question immediately put him and the woman beside him on guard. They traded another glance before cocking their heads to the side.

"I mean, I get it," I continued. "There's a gap between our status and hers. But sometimes you still have feelings for a person, even if you know it won't go anywhere."

The man shook his head the second I was done talking. "No, that would be absurd. None of us are worthy of holding such impure desires for someone as incredible as her. The only thing we wish for is Lady Clarice's happiness."

The girl beside him pressed her hand over her heart and nodded eagerly. "He's right. To us, Lady Clarice is akin to a goddess. When my family fell on troubled times, it was Lady Clarice who reached her hand out to save us. She's kind but firm when she needs to be, and her conduct is impeachable. I admire her so much." She clasped her hands as she regaled me with the tale of her past.

What's with them treating her like some kind of deity?

If what this guy claimed was the truth, her flunkies revered her too much to allow themselves to view her romantically, and even deemed such emotions as "impure." Now I understood why she was having such a rough time. There had to be at least one or two men among her entourage that she could genuinely be herself with, but they were all steadfast about her being out of their reach. That had to have shocked her.

A similar phenomenon had happened in Japan with idols, but this... this was on another level. Though, didn't the word idol originally refer to a religious object? Statues, effigies, stuff like that? If you interpreted idols by that original definition as "something to be worshiped," it *did* kind of fit.

The two before me prattled on about how noble Lady Clarice was. Then, at some point, the man stepped closer.

“Actually, my lord, I should be the one asking you those questions. Don’t you have any thoughts about Lady Clarice? She went out of her way to pretty herself up today before we came. Did you compliment her? Tell her how beautiful she is? How cute? How awe-inspiring?”

“Um, no.” I took a few retreating steps, but he took no time to close that distance back up.

“That won’t do! It’s not too late. Please tell her. I know she would be delighted to receive such compliments from you. She knew she’d be able to meet you today. That’s why she was more motivated than usual when we were making preparations to leave. It was adorable!”

Here this ripped, musclebound lackey was, speaking as politely as he could, despite his bloodshot eyes and every word an insistent plea to force me to share his values. The incongruence was discomforting—no, it was terrifying. I was trembling like a leaf.

“I-I’ll be sure to do so later!” I squeaked before scurrying off. He’d at least convinced me to locate Lady Clarice and tell her how beautiful she was. Otherwise I’d spend the rest of the day dreading the horrible confrontation we might have tomorrow and crack under the pressure they’d put on me for not following their demands.

It was only once I was a safe distance from those two that I started to feel empathy for Miss Clarice.

“I get it now. Anyone would want to complain surrounded by...that.”

The worst part was how they needlessly heaped praise on her. Miss Clarice never wanted that level of attention, but those around her had gotten out of hand with how much they constantly idolized and talked about her. It was bad enough when it was a group of single guys, but now they had partners and they were *still* doing it. Clarice had no partner of her own, so she had to watch forlornly as everyone else got cozy, all the while happily rambling about her. No one could blame her for being pissed. Complaining might have eased some of her strain, but they all respected and adored her too much for her to resort to that.

“Least I can do is let her vent.”

She was staying here at my family home. It would give her some catharsis to get out her daily woes here.

As I was on my way to visit Miss Clarice's temporary room, I happened upon my two sisters. The two were facing each other in the hallway, dressed in their casual outfits and deep in an argument about something. Jenna, the older and taller of the two, was looking down her nose at the younger Finley and jabbing a finger at her.

"Enough! Behave yourself!"

"Why?" Finley demanded angrily. "She's just a guest, isn't she?"

"Dummy. The Roseblades and Atlees are from the most prominent of the prestigious houses. If you embarrass us, you'll bring my reputation down too!"

Ah, so Jenna was trying to hammer home that Finley needed to be on her best behavior while these guests were staying here. Finley had yet to even attend the academy, so while she understood that these people were highly respected aristocrats, she'd never seen the hierarchy at work for herself. Jenna seemed to assume Finley lacked the necessary prudence to exist around their guests at all.

There was one thing I had to voice my disagreement about.

"Lower your reputation? I didn't think it could sink any lower than rock bottom." I cackled.

Jenna scowled at me. "You," she hissed. "So the rumors that you put your grubby hands on Miss Clarice were true after all!"

"Sorry?" I tilted my head in confusion.

Finley didn't even attempt to mask her disgust as she faced me. "Seriously?! You already have two fiancées but you have the nerve to cheat a second time? You're such a creep."

A second time? What was that supposed to mean? I hadn't even cheated a first time!

“You seem confused, so let me correct you. First, I’ve never been unfaithful to them. Second, it’s not two fiancées, it’s three.” I held out my hand, three fingers raised to emphasize. “And don’t forget it!”

Their quarrel moments earlier forgotten, Jenna and Finley leaned in close to whisper to one another.

“Finley, you’ve gotta be careful not to land yourself a creep like this, got it?”

“What did those other girls even see in him? He’s literally the lowest of the low, no better than sewage. I’d never pick a guy like him. No taste at all, seriously.”

Jenna nodded. “I agree. They can’t have taste if they picked him. I can only guess that these women got so used to seeing beautiful men all the time that they grew tired of it. Maybe an ugly mug like Leon’s is refreshing to them.”

“What a nice problem to have! Any normal girl would pick a pretty boy over him, though.”

My sisters were having fun disparaging me to their hearts’ content, but I had words for them too.

“As a man, let me assure you, I’d never pick girls like you, either. You’re too ugly on the inside. I mean, come on, did Jenna manage to persuade a single guy to pick her before grad—”

Before I could finish my sentence, Jenna lunged at me, slamming her fist straight into my face. She didn’t even have the grace to make it a slap. She served me a full-on knuckle sandwich.

“Hmph!”

“What happened to your face?”

Those were the first words out of Miss Clarice’s mouth when she opened the door for me. A blue bruise was already forming where Jenna had hit me.

“Apparently speaking the truth can sometimes get you injured,” I said.

I considered explaining the full scenario—that all I’d done was ask Jenna if she’d landed herself a man before graduation—but that would be stepping on a land mine, considering Miss Clarice’s present problems. If anything, I deserved kudos for thinking up something else to say on the fly like that.

Although, thinking back on it, I guess I did go a little overboard with Jenna. I’ll have to apologize later.

All I did lately was apologize to my family, or so it felt like. This was something of a pattern with me. I’d caused trouble for my family in my previous life, and here I was doing the same thing again. I had lived a lot longer than my outward appearance would suggest, but the collective experiences over those years had failed to help me mature enough mentally. It was depressing, albeit not entirely unsurprising; getting older didn’t necessarily mean one grew mentally. Things weren’t that simple.

Miss Clarice stepped closer, reaching a hand out to touch my injury. “I think it would be fastest to ask Miss Olivia to tend to this,” she said. I assumed she had debated whether to treat me herself and decided against it since Livia was here.

“Eh, this’ll heal up before you know it,” I said.

“Men are so eager to put up a brave front. Anyway, what brings you here?”

She had changed into something more comfortable and casual by this point, but I offered her a smile, nevertheless. “You looked amazing today.”

“...Huh?”

“Your hair and your clothes, I mean. I heard you spent a lot of time on them. You looked really cute. Well, uh, I said what I wanted, so I’ll be going now.” I gave her a small wave and turned to leave.

She stared after me, dumbstruck, but she managed to lift her hand and return my wave.

There. With that out of the way, I wouldn’t have to worry about her male follower coming after me to nag.

Chapter 4: Collar

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, tension hung heavy in the air from the moment the sun came up. Miss Dorothea's cheeks were bright red, and Nicks blushed all the way to his ears as he recalled the events that took place the day before. Both parties were too nervous to speak a word to each other.

"Now *this* looks like a real marriage meeting," I muttered.

The girls and I were in a separate room, intently watching everything go down through the video feed that Luxion was projecting against the wall. The situation was much different this time around; Miss Dorothea's attitude yesterday and how she was acting today were like night and day. Miss Deirdre looked particularly anxious about this abrupt shift.

"Dorothea, where'd your haughtiness disappear off to? You forced me to play along and practice with you last night, so why aren't you saying anything?!"

Aha. They'd stayed up late so that Miss Dorothea could mentally prepare herself for talking to Nicks today, going over what they might talk about, what questions she might ask, among other things. That explained why Miss Deirdre looked so sleep-deprived this morning, but any drowsiness was forgotten in the wake of her fury at how pathetic her sister was acting on screen.

Miss Clarice sat beside her. Despite how much they'd glowered at one another yesterday, she kept a straight face as she watched things play out. "They'll remain at a standstill forever if no one takes the initiative," she observed.

Miss Dorothea was acting shy and reserved, a stark contrast to her rotten attitude yesterday. She certainly looked the part of a young maiden in love, as her sister had put it, but Nicks was sweating bullets even so. He had to be wondering if he was about to face a tongue-lashing for his prior rude behavior to a lady far beyond his own station.

“My brother won’t. As his younger brother, I can assure everyone that he’s too pathetic to make the first move,” I said with a shrug.

My reaction somehow drew the attention of all the ladies I was engaged to—Angie, Livia, and even Noelle. They gawked at me. Every single girl looked like she had something to say, but they were ultimately too interested in the two frozen people on the screen to bother.

Livia smiled, a hint of excitement glinting in her eye. “I wonder what’ll happen? Personally, I hope they both manage to talk things over, if nothing else.”

It was the exact kind of response I would have expected from her. Even Angie found the situation a little thrilling, commenting, “Nothing will happen unless one of them speaks up. If it’s this dire, why not have someone go in there and take over? Then we can at least get the conversation rolling. I’d be happy to volunteer.”

“I would be the most appropriate candidate for the job,” Miss Deirdre piped in, equally eager to be assigned this duty. “We’re sisters. Lord Nicks and I were in the same year together, besides.”

Miss Clarice frowned, not the least bit convinced. “But you were in different classes, right? Same year or not, the two of you never interacted. I think it’d be better to have a completely unrelated bystander—like myself—go in there.”

The girls seemed more fired up about this today, for whatever reason.

Noelle sat in her wheelchair, eyes glued to the projection. “No idea why I find this so interesting, but I just can’t look away.”

I slipped away from the girls, who seemed to be having plenty of fun without me. Luxion drifted along beside me, and I decided to entertain myself by chatting with him instead.

“They’re suckers for this whole romance thing, huh?”

“This world lacks any real source of amusement. One might expect as much,” he replied.

True, compared to Japan, this place had little in the way of entertainment. That was probably why groups of girls found the romantic circumstances of others this fascinating.

“More importantly,” Luxion went on, “I wish to speak with you about that remark you made a moment ago, about your brother being pathetic.”

“What about it? I said what I thought, that’s all. Look at him, he’s sitting there not saying a word. That’s the definition of pathetic.”

“Remind me, how many times I have beseeched you to look into a mirror and say these same sorts of things to yourself? If anyone’s courage or lack thereof is on people’s minds, I assure you that it is not your brother’s. It’s yours, Master.”

“Who, me? I’m nowhere near as bad as he is.” I paused to glance at the girls, who had temporarily looked away from the projection to peer over at me.

Livia said to Angie, “This has to be one of his usual jokes, right?”

Angie frowned and shook her head. “I’m not so sure. I hope it’s a joke... It’d be a real shame if he sincerely believed that.”

Noelle’s reaction was the worst; she wrinkled her face and said, “Leon, when it comes to love, you’re way, way worse than Nicks is.”

They’d utterly assassinated my character. I was shocked. Shocked, I tell you.

Meanwhile, Miss Deirdre and Miss Clarice leaned in close to one another to whisper.

“Which do you think is the worst offender?” Miss Deirdre asked.

“They’re both bad, but last night, he came to my room to compliment my appearance at least. So I guess, even if only by a hair, Leon beats his brother.”

“Hold it right there. He never said anything to me about my appearance.”

They were referring, of course, to yesterday. I made that visit to Miss Clarice’s room to compliment her appearance because one of her male followers had advised me to do so. All I did was fulfill a promise I made to him, but now the girls were glaring my way as a unit. I didn’t get it.

I glanced at Luxion, hoping for some backup.

Luxion continued projecting a screen on the wall as he answered my silent plea, sounding almost disgusted. “Did it truly escape your notice that only complimenting one woman on her looks would create issues?”

“I didn’t figure anyone cared one way or the other if I complimented them.”

“Yet you would hasten to criticize another for the same foul. You may underappreciate the value you hold as a person, but such behavior is inexcusable even after taking your poor self-worth into account.”

Why was I getting bombarded with blame like this? I was wishing everyone would be a little nicer to me when, in the corner of my periphery, I noticed movement on the projection.

“Your older brother appears to be making his move,” said Luxion.

“Miss, um...D-Dorothea,” Nicks squeaked, lifting himself from his chair.

“Y-yes?!” She’d stared down at her lap the whole time, but she lifted her head when addressed. The two gazed at one another for a moment.

Though it didn’t seem that way, Nicks was sweating like crazy. *She’s a totally different person than she was yesterday.* Last time, her ice-cold attitude had chilled him to the bone; she refused to so much as look at him for the entire meeting. Today, she was acting cute enough to pass for a girl several years her junior. Nicks couldn’t figure out which Dorothea was the real one.

It...it doesn’t matter, he told himself. I’ve gotta tell her.

It was only due to a radical change in their family that he’d been saddled with the duty of inheriting his father’s lands and baron title. Though he’d been provided with education from the academy, none of that included the necessary skills he’d need in his new position. Instead, he was acting as his father’s assistant and needed to learn everything hands-on as a result.

Dorothea, meanwhile, was a true noble lady. She was far too respectable to be his wife; he couldn't so much as imagine being together with her. The difference in status was part of it, but also, such a pampered lady seemed incapable of hacking it out here in the boonies.

"Compared to regions with sprawling cities, our lands are basically pure countryside. You could go so far as to call them untamed, maybe even uncivilized, compared to that which a lady of your status must be accustomed. Miss Dorothea, would you truly want to live in a place like this?"

She stared at him, seemingly confused by his drastic change in attitude since yesterday. "Once I'm officially engaged, I will live with my future partner wherever he calls home, even if it's the countryside. Or...or is that not permissible?"

Nicks was as confounded as she was. She'd asked him if he was prepared to become her pet only yesterday. Her perfectly demure response was an unexpected curveball.

"N-no, I wouldn't go that far, but...I think you should give it some serious thought. A lady like you, who is used to living in the city, would find it boring living here, I figure."

"Um, uh..."

Equally stunned by the abrupt shift in each other's behavior, neither could fully organize their thoughts. Nicks plopped down in his seat once more and kept his mouth shut. The room returned to silence. Minutes ticked by.

This time, Dorothea summoned her courage to speak. "Um, there's something I would like to say to you." The clanking of metal sounded as she set a dog collar on the table, complete with an attached chain.

For a split second, Nicks wondered if he'd neglected to take the one from yesterday with him. Then he noticed something strange about the one she'd brought.

"Huh?" Nicks blurted.

Why does this girl have a collar with her? She scrambled out of the room yesterday the moment she saw the one I brought in. There's no way

she'd have come back in to take it later. And besides...this one's different from the one Leon gave me!

It was true. This collar had a chain that was connected to yet another collar. Dorothea took one of them and fastened it around her neck, then she held the other out toward Nicks.

What's she doing? What the hell is all of this?! I don't get what's going on. Is this some sick practical joke that city folk like to do or something?

The room around him felt like it was spinning. Dorothea smiled, a blush coloring her cheeks. "I am terribly sorry for running out on you the way I did yesterday. Allow me to explain: I have been waiting this entire time for someone who would put a collar on me instead."

"Huh? What? But...there's two collars?" Nicks's questions blurted out in incoherent fragments as he took the collar from her, too confused to express his thoughts in full.

"You see, I have no interest in any gentleman willing to become my pet without a fight. What I truly desire is a partner who will compete with me for the right to be the master of the relationship, fighting tooth and nail to establish their dominance. Will I end up bowing to him? Or will he yield to me? I have always yearned for a man who would be my rival, who'd fight to one-up me. Your challenge to me yesterday told me at once that this was fate."

All traces of emotion disappeared from Nicks's face. The realization had hit him.

This chick is unhinged. I could tell she was out of her mind the second she pulled that collar out, grinning from ear to ear, but the hell is this crap about competing with one another for the right to be the master? Nooo way. What I want is a peaceful, comfortable relationship like my parents have. This is the exact friggin' opposite!



Nicks's ideal relationship was nothing like what Dorothea envisioned. He knew right away they had no hope of seeing eye-to-eye. His brain flew into overdrive to devise some way to turn her down. The problem was that, much to his frustration, he couldn't get Leon's annoying, triumphant little grin out of his head.

I'd never have been driven into this weird situation if not for that jerk! She never would have fallen for me without him sticking his big nose where it didn't belong.

Yes, she had indeed developed feelings for him, though he wasn't sure why. Nicks was flattered to be the object of such a beautiful girl's affections. No matter how you sliced it, though, this would never work out. She was a lady of a prominent noble house!

Preoccupied as he was with finding a polite way to reject her, Dorothea faced no opposition as she reached out and lifted the collar from his hands. Before he knew what was happening, she'd snapped it around his neck. Now they were both wearing collars, connected by a chain. The situation had spiraled into something beyond all reason.

"I dreamed of being connected to my ideal partner like this, if only for a moment," she muttered. She gazed at him with a look of pure ecstasy.

Nicks was horrified. Sweat poured like a waterfall down his back. *This girl's absolutely nuts! No way is this happening!* He lobbed every curse word in the book at Leon inside his mind, even as he frantically searched for some way to get out of this mess.

"I can't do it. I can't! It's out of the question!"

Having finished his second meeting with Miss Dorothea, Nicks retreated to another room where we were conducting our strategy meeting. Our new objective was to find a safe way to avoid marriage with Miss Dorothea.

During the meeting, her eyes held such intensity whenever she looked at him that it brought a predator watching its prey to mind. Her

resolve not to let him escape was palpable.

“So, to sum things up: She wants to put collars on the both of you and maintain a married life where there’s always some tension. This happens to be the exact opposite of your ideal marriage. Well...why not just throw in the towel?”

Nicks whipped around and raised his fist at me, ready to beat me again. I threw up both hands in surrender.

“Okay, I get it. Let’s talk it out. Now that it’s gotten this far, we can turn to Angie. She knows way more about high society.”

When we turned to face her, Angie glanced up at Nicks sheepishly. “I never dreamed things would go so smoothly. I wish I could help you, but considering how complicated things have gotten, it’s going to be tough. I think marrying her is a solid option, though... What are your thoughts on that?”

Nicks shook his head again and again, vehement in his refusal. “Absolutely not!”

“It would have been much easier to refuse if Dorothea hadn’t been interested,” Angie said with a sigh. Her initial plan had actually involved Nicks refusing—there would have been no issue, since this was intended as an informal meeting. Had Nicks disliked the match and decided to back out, no one would have taken issue. Now that Dorothea was fully on board with getting engaged, the situation was much trickier.

“You stuck your hand in a hornet’s nest. Dorothea *will* use her family’s influence, and they will come back requesting a formal marriage meeting. When they do, you’d better believe they’ll do everything in their power to clear any possible obstacles.”

Apparently, the Roseblades were willing to pull out all the stops to get Miss Dorothea married off.

“An earl and his whole house are gonna come at us full force? That’s terrifying,” I blurted out, unable to stop myself.

Nicks grabbed me by the collar of my shirt, tears beading in the edges of his eyes. “This is *your* fault! I shouldn’t even be in an earl’s periphery, but you’ve got their whole house bearing down on me!”

“Hey, at least they’re not after your life...only your chastity.” I gave him a thumbs-up. Was it not an amazing prize for all his efforts to now have a girl clamoring to get in his pants?

Nicks said nothing and proceeded to strangle me.

Livia watched the two of us wrestle. She pressed a hand to her forehead and sighed. “Things certainly have gotten complicated.”

“I had hoped things would end peaceably without my involvement,” Angie said. She looked guilty. “I should have stepped in sooner. But, you know, an engagement with her really wouldn’t be that bad.”

Nicks froze at that, releasing me from his iron grip in the process. I stumbled back, covering my throat with my hand as I choked and gagged until I finally gulped down some air.

Luxion floated closer. “You brought this on yourself.”

“I was being a little playful, so sue me. Anyway, what do you mean by that, Angie? This looks like the worst possible engagement my brother could have forced on him,” I said.

Nicks silently nodded a couple of times.

Angie pulled a face and explained, “Ignoring the opinions of the two involved, what I mean is that it could be beneficial for your houses to be linked. The Roseblades are one of the most prominent of the high noble houses, not to mention that they’re wealthy and powerful too. Having a house like theirs on your side would release you from further annoying complications. Though I admit, you might find yourself pulled into troublesome matters that you wouldn’t have to deal with otherwise.”

What she was so ambiguously hinting at was that in the future, more and more people would start showing up at the Bartfort household. When they did, the Roseblade name would scare away anyone with nefarious intentions.

Nicks listened to everything she had to say but looked hesitant. “So... it would benefit our family? Even if it did...it doesn’t seem right to agree to a marriage purely for pragmatic reasons.”

Nicks was opening up to the idea, if only to protect our family, but backwater aristocrats like him and the rest of our family were fairly

ignorant of high society. As long as he observed the rules and did the bare minimum of what was required of him, he would be free to live however he wished. This wouldn't entirely remove him from power plays amongst the nobility, but it was a relatively comfy position from the perspective of those engaged in serious infighting.

Anyway, his consideration of the idea was rooted in wanting to help his family; I didn't doubt that he was more interested in marrying for love and happiness. That was my impression—but his next words proved me wrong.

"Miss Dorothea fell for a sham. That's not the real me. Even if she did marry me, she'd feel scammed when the truth came out. I could marry her to protect our house, but to do it without love...where the other side would feel cheated...isn't that a bit too cruel? I can't do that to someone, no matter how much it might benefit us."

He'd hesitated not out of concern for his own happiness but rather Miss Dorothea's.

"Wow..." I couldn't believe he'd prioritize her well-being so much.

Luxion glanced at me. "You have an amazing elder brother. It is evident now that your interference was unnecessary and harmful. You have wronged both parties. I implore you to reflect on your actions."

"Quit pouring salt in the wound!" I snapped. "But, um...I do feel bad and will try to do better."

Yeah, okay, I crossed the line by suggesting my plan to Nicks in the hope it'd make the other party dislike him. I couldn't deny my culpability there.

Nicks took a deep breath, forcing himself to smile despite the enormous burden he'd been forced to shoulder. "Sorry for all the trouble I've caused. I'll go apologize to her now. I'm fully prepared for her to punch me, if that's what she wants. All I ask is that she limit her frustrations to me and not take it out on our family."

"Hey, I'll apologize too," I said.

"No thanks. I have a feeling that things will only get out of hand if you're there. I get that you were trying to help, even if it backfired. But

you'd better think about what you did wrong. I mean it, Leon!"

Gruff as he tried to sound, he was still a nice guy. I appreciated our family a bit more for that...well, save for the two brats that I called sisters.

The sun began to set, bathing the gardens in orange light.

"After all is said and done, all I did was cause my brother more trouble," I lamented with a sigh.

I was accompanied by Luxion and Noelle, the latter sitting in her wheelchair. Angie and Livia had left to accompany Nicks. According to Angie, as long as she was present when he apologized, the other party couldn't do anything too outrageous.

I screwed things up. Worse, Angie was out there cleaning up my mess for me. I always intended to call on her if the situation required it, but now that it actually did, I was forced to reexamine how we'd managed to reach this point.

"Better not to do it in the first place, if it causes you to wallow to such a degree," Luxion advised. He sounded annoyed that I was so hung up over the situation. "You speak with such bravado, so why do you mope when issues actually crop up? It's a glaring character flaw."

"Hey, even I'm capable of feeling bad about my actions."

"Which is precisely why I wish you would show more prudence before you act."

"That's asking a bit much, if I'm half the fool you think I am. If things had been that easy from the outset, I wouldn't be suffering like I am." I took a seat on the edge of one of the nearby garden planters.

Noelle piped up, "Miss Deirdre has already agreed to forgive you, so I don't get why you're this depressed about it."

"I still hurt her."

Immediately after parting ways with my brother, I explained the situation to Miss Deirdre. I admitted the whole collar thing wasn't serious,

that we'd misinterpreted this as an official marriage arrangement, and that we had hoped to thwart it before it went through.

Her response was, "I would've preferred for you to come out and say it rather than putting on a strange act like that." She forgave me, but I could tell she was still quite upset. I should have confided in her from the start.

Angie had told me, "Just learn from this failure and do better next time." It seemed she'd always expected me to fail; that she hoped that by experiencing defeat like this, it would hit home and I'd show more caution next time.

Such a setup was only possible because I was already acquainted with the other party, Miss Deirdre, and even then I wasn't confident that we could fully go back to the way things were before. What I had done to Miss Dorothea was entirely uncalled for. Then again, the other side wasn't entirely innocent either. Miss Deirdre assured me she'd treat this like water under the bridge.

Noelle tried repeatedly to cheer me up, but she was interrupted when Colin came charging out of the estate toward us.

"Nelly! The sun's setting so it's gonna get cold. Let's hurry back inside." He maneuvered around the rear of her chair and immediately began guiding her toward the house.

"Hold up a sec. I'm still talking to Leon."

As intent as she was on making him wait for her, he was right; it was about to get much colder. The temperature always dropped once the sun disappeared. I decided it was better for her to go in.

"It's okay. Colin, make sure to escort her safely inside."

"You got it!" He happily resumed pushing her along. "Let's go, Nelly!"

"Sorry for making you do this all the time," she said.

"It's fine! I-I'm doing it because I want to... No big deal."

I watched the two disappear into the house, and I noticed that Colin looked taller than he did the last time I saw him. "He really has grown."

“Indeed. His growth, both mental and physical, appears to be proceeding along at a healthy rate. Why not follow his example, Master, and try to mature as well?”

“Life’d be much easier if things were that simple.”

A strange air permeated the harbor the following day.

“We appreciate the warm reception while we were here. It’s regrettable that things had to end this way.” Miss Dorothea bowed her head to us, then boarded the Roseblades’ airship. She stared down at her feet the whole way, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears. Her servants followed close behind, refusing to dignify us with a single glance.

Apparently, when Nicks revealed the truth to Miss Dorothea, she’d cried. Seeing how deeply distraught she was even made my heart ache. The Roseblade servants and knights who happened to glance Nicks’s way gave him dirty, resentful looks.

As I stood beside him, I whispered, “Why didn’t you pin the blame on me?”

“I have my pride as an older brother. It would be pathetic to use you as a shield.” Once he finished watching Miss Dorothea embark, he turned and left the harbor.

Angie wandered over to fill his absence. “Don’t take him at his word,” she warned, having overheard. “Lord Nicks kept quiet about it being your plan because he didn’t want to cause trouble for you. Deirdre must have realized what he was up to, since she kept quiet about it too.”

“He did it for me?”

“Your brother’s a nice guy. People like him are pretty rare, you know. You’d better not take him or the rest of your family for granted.”

The Roseblades’ airship took off from the harbor, shrinking into a tiny dot as it raced into the distance. Miss Deirdre hadn’t bothered to say a word to me before she left.

“I really lost out big this time,” I muttered. My thoughtless actions had cost me more than I’d ever imagined.

“You and your families would have grown estranged either way if your brother refused. She must have been prepared for that possibility before coming here.”

In one of the rooms on board the Roseblades’ airship, Deirdre was attempting to console her sister.

“Coincidence certainly is a terrifying thing,” she said.

“Yeah.”

“I assume telling you not to let it get to you too much won’t do any good, will it?”

“No.”

“But there *are* plenty of other men out there,” Deirdre continued. “Perhaps you can still find your ideal match somewhere.”

There was a short pause before Dorothea responded.

“Enough is enough.” She lay on her bed with a pillow clutched against her chest, her back turned toward her younger sister. “I’ve chased my dream long enough. It’s time to give up. Upon our return I’ll tell Father to use me in whatever political match-up he sees fit. If I can’t have what I want, then I’d rather not hope for anything at all.”

Deirdre sighed. She knew her sister was severely hurt by this whole ordeal. *If only they had come out and rejected us from the beginning!* Leon’s wild plan had only unnecessarily complicated things. It was safe to assume the Roseblades and Bartforts would never be connected by marriage after this mishap. *Although, that doesn’t mean we can be hostile toward them either. Leon made such a mess of this.*

The Roseblades had no intention of exacting revenge on the Bartforts. Troublesome as it would be to contend with Duke Redgrave and

his family, who had Leon's back, it was Leon himself with whom they most wanted to avoid a bad relationship.

I must suggest to Father that he leave Dorothea alone for the moment, Deirdre thought to herself. She moved to leave the room—and a panicked knight burst through the door, stopping her in her tracks. This would normally be a blatant violation of manners, but judging by how frantic he was, Deirdre could already guess that it was an emergency.

“What's the matter?” she asked.

“Sky pirates! There are over ten ships headed our way!”

“Ten, you say? Why are there so many air pirate ships out here?!”

Outside, their airship continued to fly flags emblazoned with the Roseblade crest. What should have been empty sky around them was occupied by pirates moments away from launching their raid.

“Lord Leon, please try to cheer up a little.”

In the wake of the Roseblades' departure, I draped myself across the living room couch and let my mind wander. Miss Yumeria, clad in her usual maid attire, must have assumed this meant I was depressed.

Noelle sat in her wheelchair with me, with the Sacred Tree Sapling—out of its case for once—on her lap. She explained earlier that she was on her way to take it outside to get some fresh air.

“I understand wanting to mull things over, but you really should work on your attitude a little. Miss Angelica's worried about you being so down in the dumps. She was beating herself up, saying, ‘I took things too far with him.’”

I was so gloomy that seeing me even made Angie feel bad that she hadn't taken a more active role. I didn't want to cause her undue concern, and especially not when she'd kept out of it in the explicit hope that I'd gain valuable experience from it.

“You don't have to worry about me,” I said.

“We can hardly help it. Hey, though, if you’re just gonna mope around...why don’t you take this little buddy out for some sunbathing?” Noelle lifted the sapling in her hands as she spoke, holding it out toward me.

“You want me to take Sappie and...sunbathe?”

Yumeria clasped her hands together and smiled. “Yes! This little one prefers the outside air, actually. But it’s not as though we can plant it just anywhere, so for the moment, we’re trying to at least take it on occasional trips outside.”

Sappie would eventually grow to be a Sacred Tree. As Yumeria said, we couldn’t plant it carelessly out of the fear that someone might steal it. It was also possible that, in the future, someone might make a claim to whatever land we planted it in. The sapling was confined to a cramped pot for the time being.

“Guess I should look around for a place to plant Sappie,” I mused aloud. I had nothing else to do, so I figured I’d drag Luxion along with me, but the suggestion barely left my mouth before I heard a cacophony of noise shudder throughout the house.

“What’s going on?”

I wandered out to the hallway and caught a glimpse of an official who was normally stationed at the harbor. He was a thin, bespectacled man who struck me as the spineless doormat type, while his style of dress—a white shirt with a black band across the sleeve—made him look like a real desk jockey, or your typical Japanese office worker. That made it all the stranger that he’d rushed here. He was currently discussing something with my old man.

“Over ten air pirate ships, you say?! Is the Roseblades’ vessel unharmed?” Father demanded.

“Y-yes! Knights from their ship rode out on Armors and made an emergency landing at our harbor. All of the enemy’s ships are in hot pursuit, so the Roseblades have requested our aid.”

Dad’s face darkened. A backwater barony like ours had very few warships at our disposal. The upkeep cost for a single warship, alone, was astronomical. Our increasing wealth had permitted us to buy a few more

recently, but that still put us at a whopping three warships. Going up against those pirates with a number like that was madness. Unfortunately, this was House Roseblade begging for our assistance; we'd be in a bad position later if we refused them.

As my old man was faced with this most difficult of decisions, I made my way closer and said, "Give me the location and I'll fly out in Einhorn to help them."

Dad jerked around to face me, his jaw dropping in surprise. "Leon? Uh...can you really handle that?" He knew perfectly well how quickly Einhorn could move, but he was hesitating all the same for some unclear reason. "No...no, let's not do that. Right now, we need to get men together and make preparations at the harbor."

"Understood, my lord." The official darted back out of the house on my dad's command.

I stomped after my dad. "Why'd you say no? It'd be faster for me to go!"

"Pay a bit more attention to your surroundings before volunteering yourself," he grumbled. He cast a glance over my shoulder, then raced out of the house.

I turned around to find Livia standing behind me.

"You're going to fight again?" she asked in a worried voice. Her eyes were fixed on the floor.

"Livia? Don't worry, it'll be fine. I've got Luxion with me, and Einhorn'll have no problem taking down a few pirates. And Arroganz is on board. I've got this in the bag."

She raised her face, her expression clouded and inscrutable. "Didn't you tell me you would rest...?"

"Well, yeah, but Miss Deirdre—"

A flurry of footsteps resounded around us as Angie came running with Miss Clarice and Luxion in tow.

"Leon, don't go," Angie rasped out. Hurrying here had left her out of breath. "My house and the Atlees have ships in the harbor, four of them

between the two of us. If ours join the Bartforts' forces on the field, we should get by somehow."

She wasn't the only one who didn't want me involved. Miss Clarice soon spoke up to throw her support behind Angie too.

"The Roseblades are a strong house. They won't lose easily to some pirates. And as Angelica said, the Atlees will step in to help. You stay here and rest."

"No, I *will* go out. It'll go faster with me there," I said.

House Redgrave, House Atlee, and House Roseblade—the latter of which was already engaging the pirates—were some of the most prominent in Holfort Kingdom. They paid special care to make sure their military might was up to par, so I had no doubt they would be reliable in battle. That didn't change that my presence meant we could end this all much more easily.

"I caused a lot of trouble for Miss Deirdre and her sister. This is the least I can do to set things right," I said.

"Hold it right there, you blockhead!"

Right as Angie reached out to try to grab me so I couldn't leave, a voice came booming down the hall, followed by thundering footsteps. Nicks was charging at me. He grabbed me by the collar of my shirt and shoved me against the wall.

"Nicks?!" I gasped in surprise.

His brow wrinkled as he glared at me. "Leon, do me a favor. I need your help."

"Huh? Uh, but, I'm about to go out in my ship—"

"It's my turn. I'll make sure Miss Dorothea and the others are safe... but I want you to lend me your ship."

Chapter 5: The Scumbag Knight's Older Brother

WITH OVER TEN enemy ships surrounding them, the Roseblades' vessel had no hope of victory. Instead, it opted for a full-speed retreat into the cloud cover, where visibility was poor. They couldn't see a thing in front of them, but that meant the pirates couldn't lock on to them either. It was an advantageous spot, albeit one in which they couldn't stay forever; the clues were moving, and when they eventually popped out, the enemy would find them.

Deirdre and Dorothea remained in a room together, peering out the window. Moisture had beaded on the glass, making it difficult to see through.

"I can only hope the knights we dispatched to call for reinforcements made it to land safely."

At the exact moment their ship reached the clouds, they sent out their knights in Armors. Their men had flown in different directions, hoping to increase their chances of being rescued by reaching out to multiple sources. Their chances of survival were sure to rise significantly if even one knight managed to deliver their plea. Their best chance and the closest to their current position was, of course, House Bartfort.

They ought to feel guilty for the outrageous nonsense they pulled, besides. I'm fairly sure they'll send forces here to help us, but my real concern is whether they'll make it in time or not, Deirdre thought. All she could do was pray that they would.

Dorothea clasped her hands close to her chest. Deirdre guessed her older sister was worried, judging by how pale her face had grown.

"You seem so cool and collected," Dorothea said. "Not at all like me." She trembled as she spoke.

Deirdre smiled at her, trying to break some of the tension in the air. In truth, she was absolutely terrified—but unlike Dorothea, she had found herself in life-threatening circumstances several times now, so she could

remain somewhat calm. Her first run-in with danger was during the school trip when she and the other students encountered military forces from the (former) Principality of Fanoss. The second was when they launched an invasion on the kingdom's capital. She'd seen the battlefield up close and had even faced some of the horror herself.

"My countenance might have you think otherwise, but I've been in danger before," she said. "I happen to be blessed with good fortune. I'm sure we'll get through this."

"That's reassuring."

The maids in the room also seemed comforted by Deirdre's confident speech. They didn't know that it was all empty bravado.

Both times, someone swooped in to rescue me. No, not "someone." Leon. It had been him in each case. Having remembered that, she felt guilty for her pre-departure attitude at the harbor. *I should have at least said a proper goodbye. It would be rather tragic for that to be the last time I get to see him before I die.*

Light began spilling in through the window.

"Have we come out of the cloud cover? What's it look like outside?!"

Once their ship fully broke away from the clouds, the pirates' airships came into view. The girls in the room squealed in terror. Through the view of their window, small as it was, they could see three ships.

"These guys are no amateurs," Deirdre muttered bitterly.

Among all of the aristocrats in the kingdom, the Roseblades were considered one of the most militaristic. It was a given for the head of the family to send his daughters on a ship manned by men with plenty of battle experience, and if even they were incapable of outrunning the enemy, then these air pirates were tough customers indeed. Then again, no normal band of pirates would have this many vessels in their fleet. Deirdre could see now that no name was emblazoned on the enemy's flags. She had to assume they were new to the area and had drifted here from a neighboring country.

"I've no idea where these men have come from, but they won't get off easy now that they've raised arms against the Roseblades," Deirdre said with a huff.

Their ship was already preparing their giant cannons to fire on the pirates. Though at a disadvantage, the men on board operated exactly as they did during their training exercises. The enemy idled with a close eye on the ship, too wary to approach. Before long, though, they maneuvered their ships to point their cannons at the Roseblades' ship. The barrage began shortly after that.

Cannon fire came hailing toward the ship, exploding on impact with its defensive magical barrier. Although they were protected from the brunt of the attack, its aftershock rocked the Roseblades' ship violently.

None of the furniture around them moved, having been secured to the ground in case of a situation like this one, but smaller objects in the room were thrown to the air and promptly crashed back to the floor. Likewise, the people in the room could hardly keep their balance and tumbled to the ground.

"Why aren't we retaliating?!" Dorothea cried in confusion.

Deirdre's view of the situation outside told her that if the enemy continued their attacks, their ship would find itself battered from all sides and sink.

But I can't see the full situation from here, so it's hard to say.

Deirdre and Dorothea were daughters of House Roseblade, yes, but they weren't military personnel. The captain and his crew had determined they would only be a hindrance if they wandered onto the bridge, so they were denied access from the outset. But what Deirdre saw from the window was that the pirates were sending out Armors covered in spikes. Their numbers were overwhelming, making them a formidable force to contend with.

A chill ran down Deirdre's spine as she watched their formation. *One might mistake them for a proper military.*

The enemy was organized. They were far too powerful to be ordinary pirates.

The Roseblades' ship sent out Armors of their own, but it was immediately clear that they were at a disadvantage in terms of numbers. Deirdre was already picturing the worst possible outcome—when a ship appeared out of nowhere to launch an attack on the pirates.

Deirdre spread her fan open and pressed it over her mouth. “You’re a sight for sore eyes, Einhorn.”

Sighs of relief and cheers rang throughout the room, but the same cold sweat clung to Deirdre’s back. She’d acted confident in front of the other girls but that confidence disguised a terror so gripping that she could barely stand. Seeing Einhorn made all that tension disappear instantly. It took every bit of willpower she had to keep from crumpling to the floor.

Unfortunately, she noticed something odd about Einhorn right away.

“Why isn’t Arroganz deploying?”

Einhorn’s bridge was a literal sausage fest. My old man was chief among the number of sweaty men I found myself surrounded by. He was barking orders.

“Y-you really charged straight into the enemy lines, huh? W-well, men, hurry up and deploy! I want all of our Armors out there on the field!”

It was pure chaos. Bartfort soldiers scurried around the bridge, trying to manipulate a ship they’d never touched before. I was unable to do anything. I was tied up in the captain’s chair.

“Remind me again why you guys thought it’d be a good idea to string me up like this?”

“Because you have a bad habit of going overboard. We wouldn’t have even brought you if I’d had my way,” Dad snapped.

Einhorn couldn’t achieve optimal performance without Luxion, and I was the only one Luxion would take orders from. That meant that I had to go along with them whether they liked it or not. In exchange, they’d made it impossible for me to do anything.

“This is nuts. Einhorn is *my* ship!” I shouted.

“And that’s why we brought you on. I’m more worried whether Nicks and the others are all right or not.”

Nicks had deployed with the others in Armors to face the enemy.

Luxion explained, “I produced those Armors inside my factory and can vouch for their performance. I have already calculated the power difference between us and our enemies. There should be no issues.”

That wasn’t enough to convince my dad.

“Should being the key word. There’s no absolutes in battle.”

Since he was being such a worrywart, I decided to take my chances and plead my case. “Then why not let me out there so I can give him some support? Or untie me, at the very least.”

“No. You always go too far when you’re left to your own devices.”

“The ladies at the house were very, *very* clear about not allowing you to go out on the field,” Luxion added.

Neither one of them seemed keen on letting me go. *Is Nicks gonna be all right out there on his own, though?*

The air had turned into a chaotic free-for-all. Nicks piloted his undecorated, metallic-colored Armor into battle alongside his comrades, while Einhorn continued to launch its cannons at the enemy’s ships in the background.

Einhorn’s sudden appearance had caught the pirates by surprise, but it took them no time at all to determine this new interloper was an enemy. They began their attack the moment Nicks and his men appeared.

“Have you filthy rats got any idea whose guests you’re attacking? Huh?!”

Nicks’s normally polite demeanor vanished on the battlefield. He hurled abuse at his enemies as he attacked them.

Nicks’s armor was equipped with a shield on its left hand and a glaive in his right hand. He used the latter to skewer his enemy in a single blow. Enemy units fell like flies, fortunate for the cushion of the sea below—most of their men managed to make it out with their lives intact. He

didn't have the wherewithal to worry about enemies above him, and so Nicks sought out enemies at his eye level instead.

"Tch!" He clicked his tongue as an enemy Armor crashed down on him from above. He blocked their attack with his shield, though just barely. The momentum of the attack sent them both plummeting through the air, but they each continued to exchange blow after blow, weapons clashing.

This enemy was quite the experienced pilot, proving to be more formidable than the others he'd faced. Having closed the distance, Nicks heard a shout.

"It's the ship with one horn! That must be the Scumbag Knight's ship!"

Einhorn had such a unique appearance that it had gained an impressive reputation. Curiously, the enemy also knew the unflattering epithet Leon had been stuck with.

"Yeah? And what of it?" Nicks spat back. He kicked the enemy Armor away to create distance between the two of them.

As the two swiveled and rotated in the air, they would charge at each other, weapons ricocheting again and again in fierce battle.

"You the Scumbag Knight?" asked the enemy pilot.

"That'd be my younger brother."

"Wait. The Scumbag Knight has an older sibling?"

"Well *excuuuse* me for being too boring to be memorable!"

From the exchange that unfolded during their battle, Nicks understood just how far Leon's name had spread. His inferiority complex flared up to unprecedented heights.

My kid brother's such a hotshot that I'm passed off as the boring, forgettable one, huh?

Leon drew attention to himself as soon as he set foot in the academy. Everything he did made him stand out. His antics were the constant topic of many students' conversations. As much as he hated it, it was only fair for people to draw comparisons when they learned that Nicks was Leon's older brother. He essentially lived in Leon's shadow and was considered plain

and uninteresting for it, which had led to people telling him that he was a “sad excuse for an older brother” and “unnoteworthy.”

Fortunately, Nicks only had to put up with all this for a single school year, but even after he graduated, he would hear of his brother’s latest remarkable achievements and compare himself to them. He was convinced that he could never be like his younger brother, no matter how much effort he expended. They were blood siblings, so why were they virtually worlds apart?

Nicks would be lying if he said he wasn’t jealous of Leon. His little brother’s many jaw-dropping accomplishments had carried him up the social ladder. In the blink of an eye, he’d snagged three amazing women—even gotten engaged to them. Nicks knew it was futile to waste time yearning after what Leon had managed, though. He was also far too nice to hold on to that bitterness.

Every dumbass around wants to go on and on about what a hero Leon is, how incredible he is. They don’t have a clue how much grief he’s given me his whole life! All Leon was in Nicks’s mind was the epitome of a troublesome little brother.

“Well, if the Scumbag Knight isn’t coming out, we’ve got nothing to fear,” said the enemy pilot. “Just gotta wipe you out and make a run for it!”

Nicks charged at the pirate at full speed. When they clashed, he slammed his shield against his opponent and threw them off-balance.

“He’d never waste his time on a puny grunt like you!” Nicks spat.

He recalled the moment they all boarded Einhorn together.

“You don’t want us to let Leon fight?” Nicks asked.

“That’s right.”

Before boarding Einhorn, Angie, Livia, and even Noelle had come to see them off. Angie’s status as a duke’s daughter far surpassed his own, but she went as far as bowing her head to him when she made her request.

“You know that he’d go out there even if I stood in his way, right?”

“That’s precisely why I want you to make sure it doesn’t happen,” Angie insisted.

That did little to explain how Nicks was supposed to accomplish this task, or even why it mattered.

Livia explained, “Mr. Leon has fought far too much in a short span of time. His mental state is in worse shape than he realizes. While he was in the Republic, he pushed himself well beyond his limits. He hasn’t been sleeping properly either—he must resort to medicine to help get through the night. So please...!”

It wasn’t until she brought up the sleeping drugs that it hit him: His younger brother was having a tough time.

Livia opened her mouth to say more, but the words caught in her throat. Her concern for Leon had overwhelmed her. Noelle stepped to cover for her. “We feel bad asking this of you, but even Luxion said that it would be better to let him rest for now. We beg you. If Leon tries to go into battle, stop him for us.”

Seeing how worried they all were, Nicks could only offer a jerky nod. *I’m envious of you, Leon. Look at how much they love and care about you.*

“Y’know, that dummy is always sticking his nose in where it doesn’t belong, then pushing himself past his limits. He’s a real pain in the rear, making everyone worry about him all the time! And he’s a friggin’ marquess now! How come I’m still cleaning up after him, huh?!” Nicks violently slammed his foot against the enemy’s Armor, venting all of his pent-up rage into the kick. It was weighty enough that he knocked the pirate’s weapon away with his glaive.

As he closed in on the enemy’s position, the pirate panicked and made to scurry away. The moment they turned away, Nicks impaled their Armor with his glaive. The pirate must have avoided injury, because they let out an earsplitting squeal.

“I-I get it, okay! I surrender! I surrender, so please let me go!”

“It’s a little late for that. Here, go swim with the fishies.” Nicks yanked his blade from the pirate’s suit and sent the Armor plummeting down into the ocean below.

Panting after that intense encounter, Nicks scanned the area for any other enemies to engage.

“Idiotic moron,” he grumbled under his breath. “How much worry does he intend to keep causing everyone? He should take a walk in my shoes for a change. I don’t have the time to waste babysitting him all the time.”

Nicks’s thoughts then turned to his sweet soon-to-be sisters-in-law who had shown such care over Leon’s well-being. Foulmouthed as he had been about his brother, Nicks was relieved. “With girls like those looking out for him, I guess he doesn’t need me playing babysitter anymore.” There was something sad about watching the brother he’d helped care for as a boy grow into his own and become fully independent.

As he moaned and groaned to himself about the troublesome sibling he’d been saddled with—and would soon be free of—Nicks’s gaze landed on the Roseblades’ ship. An enemy Armor had touched down there.

“You jerks just don’t know when to give up, do you?!”

Nicks flew straight to the deck of the Roseblades’ ship. In a last-ditch attempt to cause havoc, the enemy started running amok as soon as they landed upon it. Nicks raced straight at them, holding his shield ahead as a battering ram to slam into his opponent. He successfully knocked the pirate off the deck and hurled them toward the ocean. The impact was so violent that their suit’s functions shut off altogether. Sadly, the same went for Nicks’s Armor.

“Crap, now I’ve done it.”

An alarm rang in his ears from within the cockpit, informing him that malfunction had occurred with one of the Armor’s parts. It was good luck that the battle seemed to be over now. The skies around them had quieted. Once Nicks was certain it was safe, he opened his hatch and climbed out.

“Wonder if Luxion’s gonna give me an earful for that,” he mumbled. The damage he’d caused the suit might land him in hot water. He couldn’t help but worry.

He hopped down to the deck to find the Roseblade crew gathered there. Among them was one of the knights who had glared earlier when they set out from the Bartforts’ harbor. Now, however, he grabbed Nicks by both hands and grinned.

“You saved our skin. I’m serious. We owe you everything!”

“Huh? Uh, err, I guess...?”

Nicks forced a smile, awkwardly playing off his contributions. In truth, he was a bit relieved. *Maybe this makes up for all the trouble I caused...?*

Everyone was in good spirits now that the battle was over. Some of the women who’d been on board wandered out onto the deck. Dorothea was one of them.

“Lord Nicks?” she asked tentatively.

Presumably, she’d come out to convey her gratitude for the assistance. But the moment she stepped out and spotted Nicks, her eyes widened and her jaw dropped.

Nicks was similarly startled by her sudden appearance. “Uh, Miss Dorothea...”

The atmosphere was full of pomp mere moments prior to her arrival, but as soon as the two came face-to-face, the air turned tense. Nicks looked guilty. Dorothea, for her part, dropped her gaze as though her heart had been broken.

In spite of the bitter parting, Dorothea did manage to say, “On behalf of the Roseblade family, please allow me to thank you for what you have done. We are most grateful for your assistance. You truly are our savior, Lord Nicks.”

Nicks quickly waved his hands in front of him to dismiss the idea. “Oh, come on... I didn’t do anything that special.”

Dorothea smiled sadly. “You know, when you speak *too* humbly, it comes across as sarcasm. Your house put their lives on the line to ensure

our safety. Acting like it was nothing makes it sound as though our lives had no value either.”

Having grown up in the relaxed countryside, Nicks was humble by nature. He hadn’t realized his attitude could be misconstrued until Dorothea’s warning.

“You have a point. My mistake.”

The two stayed awkwardly standing in front of one another, locked in silence now that he had accepted her gratitude. Those watching grew more and more impatient as the seconds trickled by.

Deirdre snapped her fan open to draw people’s attention. She used it to shield her mouth as she ordered, “We’ll let our guest see to my elder sister. The rest of you, return to your positions. Dorothea, if you would, please escort our guest inside.” Her gaze wandered to the skies, where she spotted Einhorn drifting closer. “I’ll go speak with them.”

Einhorn and the Roseblades’ ship lined up parallel in the sky. Ally ships filled the air, taking the sky pirates into custody. Miss Deirdre had traveled from her family’s vessel to Einhorn’s deck, where we presently both sat talking. For some reason, my old man *still* hadn’t untied me.

Luxion floated next to me, but everyone else was busily running around. My dad had even made up some excuse to avoid speaking to Miss Deirdre, presumably due to her superior status. Not that it was all that big of a deal; with how well acquainted the two of us were, he probably figured I was best suited for this job anyway.

Miss Deirdre was in a buoyant mood. “You have saved me numerous times by now. I swear I’ll pay you back for it.”

Well, if she seriously wanted to make me happy, nothing would bring more light to my heart than a demotion from my current position. Sadly, I knew that rat Roland would step in to block any attempts on that front.

“If you want to thank me, then forget about everything that went down between us this time. It really wasn’t my brother...that is, it wasn’t

Nicks's fault. Make sure Miss Dorothea knows I'm the one to blame, not him."

"I'll be sure to pass that along. Digressions aside, though...I really would like to thank you properly, to which end I wish to extend an invitation for you to visit our family's lands."

I guessed they meant to throw some kind of banquet to show their gratitude. Our achievements here had warranted that much, to be fair, but my family wasn't all that great at the whole formal party shtick. I doubted a single one of them would enjoy it even if they participated. At the same time, we were hardly in a place to refuse the invitation. I decided to accept anyway, in part as an apology for how poorly we'd wronged them. I hoped saying sorry in person would help convince them to forget the whole incident.

"As long as you make it a casual thing," I said. "We're not fond of formal parties, being countryfolk and all. We don't much practice those highfalutin society manners out in these parts."

"I'll take care of it, don't worry. We would never cause our guests embarrassment."

With that out of the way, I craned my neck to search for Nicks. "So, uh, where is my older brother anyway?"

Two Armors had returned to the ship, carrying my brother's suit between them, but the pilot wasn't on board.

Deirdre's fan concertinaed out to obscure her mouth. "Oh, he's busy speaking with my sister at the moment."

Back aboard the Roseblades' ship, Nicks found himself sitting across from Dorothea with a table sandwiched between them. A maid had prepared tea for him, but he'd already drained his cup dry. Now the two of them were alone, though. Dorothea had promptly excused the maid.

What am I doing here? Nicks wondered. He didn't want to make things any more unpleasant for Dorothea than he already had, but another

apology felt necessary.

Dorothea interrupted him before he could try. “Could I ask you one question?”

“Y-yes!” he replied, his voice cracking. His back shot up straight while his hands balled into fists on his lap.

Dorothea looked even more exhausted now than he remembered. Having their ship assailed by pirates must have frightened her to the core; she was so emotionally spent that her eyes shimmered with tears.

“Am I really that unacceptable of a partner?” she asked.

“Huh?”

“Lord Nicks, do you hate me? Please, tell me what you find so displeasing about me. If it’s something I can fix, I swear I will, so...” She swallowed the end of her sentence and shook her head. After straightening her posture, she forced a smile. “Excuse me. What I meant to say was...I thought it might benefit me to know what so perturbed you about me, so I thought I would ask.”

“Oh...okay. Well, uh, I don’t, er, hate you or anything. That’s absolutely not the case. You’re beautiful. You’d be wasted on a guy like me.”

“Then what turned you away? Was it...was it the collar?”

Dorothea surely realized that her proclivities weren’t exactly mainstream. Part of Nicks wanted to respond, “Uh, yeah, of course,” but he opted for a more mature response.

“I realize that everyone has their own preferences. Still...bringing a collar out of nowhere is a bit off-putting. People should get to know each other a little better before introducing something like that, right? Though I guess that doesn’t sound too convincing coming from me.”

If Leon were here, he’d tell her exactly why it’s wrong and be blunt about it, to boot. As much as Nicks envied Leon’s self-assuredness, he also recognized that they were two different people.

Dorothea dropped her gaze to her lap.

Nicks continued, "I'm from the rural countryside. The ultra-glam lifestyles of folks in the city don't suit me. I know political marriages are normal to most aristocrats, but I grew up with two parents who love each other and live peaceful, uneventful lives. I'd like to have the same for myself."

To Nicks, finding a wife and living the same way that Balcus and Luce did would be a dream come true.

"The whole part about who will be the master in the relationship and stuff...that's not really for me. That's why I don't think the two of us should be together."

Their personalities didn't match. It only followed that being together would bring them unhappiness in the future. If Nicks compromised his own wants and values to suit Dorothea, it would cause strain on him; Dorothea would be equally dissatisfied by the kind of lifestyle that Nicks desired.

Dorothea lifted her gaze. "We should have spoken frankly like this from the beginning, I guess." Her sad smile remained, but it had softened. Any bitterness was long gone. No longer did she resemble an ice princess who refused to let anyone get within arm's length. Seeing her like this, Nicks could almost fall for her himself.

"I-I guess so," he said. "If we'd talked it out like this, we could have avoided that whole mess."

Had they talked like this right away, neither one of them would have had to get hurt.

Instead of relying on Leon, I should have just held my ground. Some pathetic excuse for an older brother I am... Nicks stared down at his knees, inwardly admonishing himself.

At last, he lifted his chin, straightened himself, and bowed his head. "I am truly sorry for everything that happened."

"You have apologized more than enough by now." At her reassurance, he looked up. "However...there is one thing I would like to say to you."

Nicks was prepared for her to give him a piece of her mind. It was a surprise when she blushed.

“When you flew in to save us in our time of need, Lord Nicks, you looked truly memorable to me.”

“Huh? Uh, don’t tell me you heard all that...?” It was his turn to blush tomato-red, embarrassed to learn she’d overheard his conversation with the enemy.

Dorothea grinned in apparent amusement. “I see. Even a gallant knight who willingly dashes onto a dangerous battlefield can feel embarrassed by his own words, hm?”

“Uh, well, I...yeah.”

“You’re an amazing man. You ought to have more confidence in yourself.”

“Kind of hard to do that with a brother as accomplished as Leon. Can’t help comparing myself,” Nicks confessed.

“Oh? You have some issues with your brother, then?”

“I’d be lying if I denied it. Though I also know that if someone asked me to do all the things he’s done, I wouldn’t have a hope of pulling it off.”

The conversation picked up from there. The two smiled as they chatted until the maid finally returned to call for them.

The Roseblades resided within a city where they maintained an enormous castle for their own needs. The head of their household, Earl Roseblade, was a tall and muscular man, with harsh lines on his face that suggested he was a strict patriarch. That impression was soon shattered. Understandably distraught to hear that his two daughters had been assailed by pirates, he immediately threw his arms around both girls when they arrived at the castle.

“I am overjoyed to have you both back here safe and sound!”

Dorothea and Deirdre looked exasperated by his exaggerated show of affection, not least because their servants were present to witness the whole thing.

“Father, you’re making everyone else here feel awkward.”

“Have you any idea how much I worried for you both?! I’ve a mind to dispatch a military force to the airspace where you were targeted. I’ll see that any pirate ship in that area goes down! Every single one!”

Deirdre averted her gaze, finding it too exhausting to even bother arguing the point with him. Dorothea faced him earnestly despite his extreme outburst, breaking in to say, “Father, there is something I would like to ask of you.”

“What is it? I heard that the meeting fell through, but I’m positive you’ll have another chance. We just need to find a way to hide that little fetish of yours—”

Dorothea pulled a face. Her father’s inconsiderate pointing out of her perceived flaws was deeply grating. “Please listen,” she reiterated. “You see...”

Chapter 6: Marriage

“**T**HE ROSEBLADES’ STRONGHOLD is different from what I’d pictured,” I said.

“Oh? What did you imagine instead?” Luxion asked.

“I dunno. A place filled with gruff adventurers milling about, I guess. I heard they’re pretty proud of their adventurer heritage, so you’d think it’d be pretty standard to see more of those rough-and-tumble types around these parts, right?”

“Well, your answer certainly is illuminating in one respect: You have made what you think of adventurers clear. A group of savage scoundrels—yourself included, I assume.”

“Am I wrong? Look at the monarch! He fits that definition to a T.”

Sure, Roland looked like a proper king on the outside, but he was rotten to the core.

Per the Roseblades’ invitation, we had come to visit their land. Luxion and I were currently touring the inside of their city.

Luxion scrutinized our surroundings. He commented, “They must have continuously expanded upon what was already built, but I see such inefficiency here. If they wished to use the land to its full potential, I could list a number of places in sore need of improvements.”

“This isn’t a game,” I reminded him. “You can’t switch into build mode and fix things on the fly.”

The same issues on the city leaders’ plates had plagued Japan as well. Say the government wanted to create a street: First, they had to gather local residents to explain the situation to them, then go about purchasing the land necessary for the project. There were all kinds of hurdles. Maximizing efficiency on the massive scale that Luxion suggested brought a laundry list of obstacles along with it.

“This world has its own aristocracy, so I suspect they can implement such improvements far easier than you realize. The benefit of enjoying absolute power is that one may take action quickly.”

“Yeah, well, this isn’t my territory. I’ve got no right to butt in.”

“A rational argument,” he conceded.

The Roseblades’ castle was located inside a fortress city with walls surrounding the perimeter. This place wasn’t as vast and overwhelming as the capital, but it was far more developed than our lands were. The stone streets and buildings were filled with so much charm that merely walking around and admiring our surroundings was entertaining.

“By the way, are you quite sure it was wise to leave the others without discussing things with them first?” Luxion asked.

“The party’s tonight. We’re free to do whatever until then, yeah? And my old man and brother are the guests of honor. I’m a side act at best—they aren’t gonna care if I’m not there. Besides, if I was on Einhorn, they’d just keep me tied up anyway.” I shot him a pointed, resentful look as I said that last part.

His lens turned away from me. It was like he was refusing to meet my gaze. “Angelica and the others made the decision. If they’d really had their way, you wouldn’t have been on the battlefield at all.” What, was he inadvertently suggesting that he couldn’t possibly ignore a request from the girls?

I sighed. “I’m telling you, they worry too much.” I stuffed my hands in my pockets as I walked along.

Luxion continued floating beside me, acting every bit like a nagging mom the entire time. “I recommend taking a break for your mental health. After all, Master—emergency evasive maneuvers!” He accelerated away from his current position. A split second later, a rock sailed past me from the side.

“Whoa! Wh-who threw that?” I whipped around to find a group of young delinquent boys.

One kid scratched his upper lip. He had another small rock held in his right hand. “There’s a weird thing floating in the air. Game rules say that

whoever manages to hit it wins.”

These brats popped out of nowhere and somehow had immediately selected Luxion as the target for their competition. Throwing rocks at people was one rough way to play! I was in my most casual threads, so it made sense they’d mistaken me for an ordinary civilian.

“The audacity of you new humans...” Luxion hissed.

I grabbed him and immediately broke out into a run, putting as much distance as I could between us and those kids.

Luxion sounded none too pleased with my decision. “Why are you fleeing? If you reported this to the earl’s house, they would see that those children are properly punished. You are a *marquess* now, Master. They committed a serious crime, one that requires they be judged.”

“It’s fine. We’re running. I’m not about that kinda hassle!”

Luxion’s words reflected the values of this world. All things considered, Holfort Kingdom was kind to its inhabitants, even by my own values. But if a commoner disobeyed or disrespected an aristocrat without good cause, they would pay for it. I figured it’d be easier to just run away to avoid all of that.

I flew down one of the larger streets, pumping my legs at top speed. This place was practically a backyard to those kids, so I knew they’d corner me if I was stupid enough to blunder down one of the alleyways. A main stretch of road was my best bet.

“Damn it, he’s fast!”

The kids scrambled after me, but their legs couldn’t keep up.

“Haha! You dumb kids better not underestimate me! I beefed up these legs of mine in the dungeons. You’re about to see just how quick they really are!”

When I managed to shake them off at long last, I ducked into a random café to hide.

“Phew, that was exhausting,” I said.

I only released Luxion once I’d found a seat. A waiter came over to take my order—I asked for a drink—and then promptly left. Luxion waited

until they were gone before he started interrogating me.

“Why did you run?” he demanded again. “They launched their attack on us with hostile intentions.”

“They’re kids. Let it go.”

“Is that an order?”

“I guess so, but it’s also something I’m asking as a favor.”

“A favor?”

Punishing kids for such trivial things was a line I personally refused to cross. Blame the values I’d developed in my past life, maybe. I couldn’t stomach it.

“I’d prefer to let things slide when that’s an option. Oh, hey, wait...” I paused. “Maybe I should’ve let those kids’ parents know about this. Then they could punish them for it. I backed down this time, but if those kids tried it with some other aristocrat, it’d be a serious problem.” I nodded to myself several times, convinced.

“Allow me to clarify: You refuse to punish them through official channels but are more than willing to get back at them? I thought your policy was to never harm children?”

“Well, y’know. They pissed me off, so they’re gonna get it.”

Luxion’s lens moved from side to side. “A petty individual to the end.”

“I told you before that I don’t mind being petty, pretty sure. Anyway, it’ll benefit those kids to get scolded while they’re young, when it won’t affect them too much. I’m worried about their future, see. Thinking about it like that, doesn’t that make me the exact opposite of petty? If anything, I’m being considerate.”

That sounded a little shameless even for me. Seriously, though, I genuinely did think it was a good idea for them to face the consequences of their actions at this age. Throwing rocks when there were crowds around could have wound up seriously hurting someone. They had to stop.

“Someone truly considerate—the opposite of you, in short—wouldn’t stoop to silly methods of revenge. They’d chastise the children directly. Am

I wrong?”

“You’ve got a point there. Whatever! Time to sniff out these kids’ identities and let their parents know about their mischief. What a great way to kill time till the evening!”

“By all means then, be my guest.”

“There, justice has been served!”

After looking into where those kids lived, I tattled to their parents about how they were throwing rocks on one of the city’s main roads. Those brats got an earful about it, as you’d expect.

When I returned to the Roseblades’ castle, my family was gathered in a spacious room. I relayed the details of my adventures to them there.

Angie gave me a withering look. “Here I was, wondering what you’d slipped away to do, and you were taking petty revenge on some children? Leon, can’t you dial down your temper the tiniest bit?”

Even Livia seemed concerned about my actions. “Well, I suppose these children might have caused further issues down the line. It wasn’t a bad idea to scold them while at an age where the consequences are less severe. Still, tracking down where they live is going a bit overboard.”

“You went that far?” Noelle asked, her lips quirking at the edges in a strained smile. “You realize they’re just kids, right? You could’ve scolded them right after they threw the rock and left it at that.”

None of them fully rejected what I’d done, but I wasn’t exactly drowning in support either. They all seemed a bit put off by me. We kept talking anyway, until Colin suddenly showed up.

“Nelly, Mom’s asking to see you in the other room.”

“She is? Guess I’d better go, then.”

Noelle reached down to move the wheels of her chair herself, but being the diligent young man he was, Colin quickly scurried around behind

her chair and grabbed the handles. He was far better behaved than those street urchins out there. I was proud to be his older brother.

“I’ll push your chair for you,” he said.

“Thanks for always helping me like this.”

Colin blushed and stared down at his feet, pleased to have her approval.

Angie watched the two of them leave and pressed a hand to her forehead. “They do say that first loves aren’t fated to be...but I still pity him for this one.”

Livia’s face was equally forlorn as she watched my brother go. “Oh, Colin. He’s always pushing her chair from behind, so he rarely gets the chance to look her in the eye. I heard when he does try to talk to her face-to-face, he gets too flustered and runs away.”

The two girls turned strangely serious as they continued this topic.

“That must be why Noelle hasn’t realized it yet. It’s so obvious from an outside perspective.”

“He blushes and hides behind her chair, so she can’t get a good look at him. That’s the issue. From what I’ve heard, when he *does* speak to her, he only manages a handful of words at best.”

“It’s a vicious cycle,” Livia agreed. “But I waffle back and forth about whether anyone should say anything.”

“Hmm... Personally, I—”

The heck are they talking about?

“Hey, what’s this whole conversation about?” I asked, genuinely confused.

The two girls stared at me, flabbergasted. They traded glances and then shook their heads. They refused to tell me anything.

“Huh? What is it? Luxion, do you know what this is about?”

“Master, you are exceptionally oblivious. I am almost impressed by the depths of your ignorance; I commend you for it.”

“Okaaaay, and? Spill the beans.”

“Please give it some thought for yourself.”

In the end, not a single person in the room would say a peep to me.

The party the Roseblades hosted that night met my old man and Nicks’s requests perfectly. The only attendees were those from our respective houses, and the venue was styled like a buffet where you could stand and eat, resulting in a more relaxed atmosphere without the dull formalities.

I spent my time piling food on my plate. My dad and brother, meanwhile, found themselves surrounded by members of the Roseblade household, who showered them with gratitude for the role they played in driving off the pirates. Neither looked comfortable with this. I kept my distance and watched them from afar.

Miss Deirdre and Miss Dorothea stood beside Earl Roseblade.

“The guest of honor seems to be having a tough time,” I commented with all the interest of an unaffiliated observer.

Luxion was in his usual spot, floating beside me. “I assume that is due to his lack of familiarity with these sorts of parties. Also, Master, permit me: You have consumed nothing but meat at this event so far. I strongly suggest you add some vegetables to your plate.”

“I will take your comments under consideration,” I said mockingly.

“Oh, will you?” He seemed to sense at once that I’d thrown his words back at him, and he wasn’t pleased about it. He had an impressive range of emotions for an AI.

Scanning the area, I noticed that even Noelle had a group of people clustered around her wheelchair. It seemed people were asking about the situation in the Alzer Republic. They were also curious about Noelle herself, given her position as Sappie’s Priestess. My mom and Colin were glued to her side. I kept an eye on her nevertheless, just in case I needed to rush over there and help.

Livia made her way over while I was distracted and grabbed me by the arm. “Mr. Leon, does my dress look strange to you?”

“It looks perfect on you.”

I knew why she was nervous. Livia was unused to these kinds of dresses. “Angie and I had our dresses prepared together, but it’s rare that I get an opportunity to wear something as expensive as this. You’re sure it doesn’t look weird?”

The white-and-blue color scheme of her gown complemented her beautifully in my opinion.

Angie, clad in a stunning red dress, marched over and looped her arm around Livia’s. She kept her shoulders back and her head held high with confidence, having worn gowns like this to many parties before.

“Don’t worry. It looks great on you,” Angie said. “More importantly, Earl Roseblade expressed his interest in speaking to you, Leon.”



“Huh? I’ve got nothing to say to him.” I was hoping to avoid these niceties, but I should have known better. Angie would never let me escape so easily.

“He can hardly ignore a marquess that his family invited to this party.” Her voice had a motherly quality, kind but firm as she scolded her child and persuaded them to follow social protocol. “All you have to do is engage him in a little small talk. Better start getting used to it now.”

I reluctantly acquiesced, if only because of her assurance that it would be a quick round of pleasantries.

Angie glanced at Livia. “Bring Noelle over here.”

“Sure.”

When Livia left to fulfill Angie’s request, Angie slipped over to me and hooked her arm through mine. She leaned in close, her lips hovering not more than a hair’s breadth from my ear, her moist breath tickling against my skin. Her voice was an erotic whisper when she finally spoke... “There’s something off about the atmosphere at this party.”

Seeing her in such a formal gown had gotten me more excited than I realized, but in a rather anticlimactic twist, her concern was with the party.

“...You think they’re gonna try to get back at us?” I went on guard, suspecting vengeance for the impudence we’d shown to them back home.

“That does not appear to be the case,” Luxion said. “I detect no danger in the vicinity nor poison in the food. Perhaps Angelica is mistaken.”

I felt a brief flicker of relief. Then Angie insisted, “No. Something’s odd. It’s not hostility...but there’s something niggling at the back of my mind.”

Is her sixth sense acting up or something? Or intuition, maybe?
Whatever it was, she’d noticed something wasn’t quite right.

I cautiously surveyed the area but didn’t see anything suspicious. Miss Clarice was participating in the party alongside us, but she had inserted herself deep in the hubbub and was surrounded by a dense forest of people. She’d been there since the party began. We hadn’t had chance to

talk yet—when I tried to call over to her, there were too many bodies in the way for my voice to reach her.

“Hmm. I don’t sense anything,” I said.

Livia soon returned with Noelle. As if he’d been waiting for their signal, Earl Roseblade strolled over at once with Miss Deirdre in tow. Miss Dorothea wasn’t with them. My eyes wandered idly and happened to spot her near Nicks, who’d managed to escape the crowd and flee to the edge of the room.

Angie must have spotted him too because she commented, “Another way in which the two of you are two peas in a pod.”

“In what way?”

“Oh, never mind.” Angie snickered under her breath but then dropped into a gracious curtsy as Earl Roseblade approached. Livia belatedly joined in, mimicking Angie, although she lacked the same grace and practiced finesse.

Earl Roseblade stopped in front of me. His voice was jovial as he said, “I suppose this is our first time meeting face-to-face, isn’t it? I have heard so many whispers about you already, Marquess Bartfort. First, allow me to convey my sincerest gratitude for the role you played in helping my daughters.”

The difference in our ages was vast. Typically, a guy as old as the earl would never speak to me with such a high degree of formality—he was laying on the respect thanks to my superior title. I wasn’t used to having adults talk to me like this.

“Yes, uh, I hope you’ll let me express my gratitude for inviting us here,” I said. Despite my best efforts, my words came out stilted.

“All of that aside,” Miss Deirdre kindly interjected, “you certainly have managed to snag yourself some striking fiancées, Hero.”

I managed a smile. “They’re more incredible than I deserve.”

Her remark was a blatant attempt to tease me. Receiving barbs from a familiar face was way easier to handle than conversing with high-ranking adults. Unfortunately, her father also saw fit to join the fray.

“They do say great men have great sexual appetites to match, do they not? Perhaps three isn’t enough for you, my lord.”

“No, I’d say it’s already too much,” I said quickly.

“Hardly! Our newest hero has an obligation to see his lineage continue. You were but the third son of your family when you started out, and now, after all your awe-inspiring adventures, you stand before me as a marquess. You are the first in all of Holfort Kingdom’s history to accomplish so much in only a single generation. A decorated hero such as you would be forgiven for taking on additional wives, I’m sure.”

The Roseblades had started out as adventurers themselves. I was sure that part of why he so readily acknowledged all I had done was due to my success as an adventurer. That didn’t make it any less awkward; this felt like having relatives tease you about your love life at a family reunion.

I glanced at my three smiling fiancées. They were all listening quietly, with no obvious signs of anger. I guessed that they’d registered his suggestion as idle conversation and nothing more.

“While we’re on the topic, what do you think of my Deirdre?” asked Earl Roseblade.

“Huh? I think she’s beautiful.”

What other answer could I possibly give in this situation? Deirdre’s gorgeous blonde hair was styled in corkscrew drills, and she wore a perfectly tailored blue dress that struck a dramatic contrast with Angie’s red one.

Miss Deirdre hid her mouth with her folding fan. “Of course! It’s only natural you’d say that.”

The earl beamed at my answer as well. “My daughter is most pleased to hear such praise, as you can see. I think I’ve taken up enough of your valuable time, though. Please enjoy the festivities tonight.”

I let out a quiet, shaky breath the moment they were gone. “Phew, my nerves did a real number on me there.”

“Indeed, your responses were noticeably awkward,” Luxion observed. “Did you feel intimidated by the sheer power that man holds?”

“I can’t deny that. What can I say? I’m a timid guy.”

“You are far too immodest to be classed as such.”

While the two of us joked, Angie’s expression hardened. She stared after Earl Roseblade and Miss Deirdre, smiling, although her smile didn’t reach her eyes. “The Roseblades covet too much.”

“How do you mean?” I cocked my head, clueless as to why her mood had soured so much.

Since some of the tension in the air had lifted, Noelle felt comfortable enough to field the question for Angie. “See, I think you kinda misunderstood his question just now. He was basically asking if you were interested in taking a fourth wife, right?”

“Nah. No way.”

Offering his daughter up as my fourth bride? That wasn’t a reasonable thing to suggest at all, let alone take him up on. If I saw a dude surrounded by three beautiful women, each with her own amazing personality, I’d have to actively restrain myself from punching his lights out. Any man would be jealous. Insinuating that a guy like that should add another to his harem was absolutely ludicrous.

Livia seemed to be of the same mind as the other two, unfortunately. “The earl had a rather pointed look in his eyes for a moment there, didn’t he? I don’t think he was joking.”

The earl had to be livid with me for having this many girls on my arm. As a fellow man, I could understand where he was coming from.

“He’s just jealous though, y’know? If I ran into a guy in my situation, I’d be desperately cursing him to get screwed over.” Not that wishing for someone’s misfortune would do much to bring it about. I knew that. Still, it wouldn’t stop me from being green with envy. I never dreamed that one day envy like that would be directed at *me*.

Luxion couldn’t help but butt in with his usual sarcasm. “You haven’t matured at all since the moment I first met you. You make such a habit of betraying my expectations... Why not betray them here and surprise me in a good way, for once?”

Barbs like these had become a regular feature in our daily interactions.

“I’ll give it some thought if I’m in the mood. Anyhow, where’s Nicks at?” I’d been scanning the area where my family was during my chat with Luxion. My older brother was the only one conspicuously absent.

Angie’s mood took a sudden and dramatic shift. She sounded almost amused as she suggested, “I’ll bet he’s being driven into a corner as we speak.”

“Driven into a corner? Hey, hold on a second!”

Nicks had retreated from the party venue to an outside balcony. Free from the debilitating anxiety that had consumed him inside, he took a deep gulp of air and leaned his body against the outside railing.

“I was so nervous in there...”

It mattered not what he ate or drank—the flavor didn’t register on his tongue. All he knew was that he felt grossly uncomfortable. Mingling with aristocrats he’d never normally have any cause to interact with had left him utterly exhausted. He wasn’t eager to repeat the experience.

Dorothea, who had followed him outside, giggled at his exaggerated reaction. “You accomplished so much on the battlefield, but I see you’re hopeless when it comes to parties.”

Nicks scratched his cheek. “I’m not used to this sort of thing. Our parties back home are more lively.”

Lively was an understatement. Bartfort parties were downright obnoxious. No one cared about adhering to manners, so the room would roar with laughter and squabbling. Nicks disliked those parties too, if he was being honest. He preferred the dull monotony of daily life, and he didn’t see the point in making a ruckus.

“Didn’t you attend any parties like these in school, though?” Dorothea asked.

“I had friends with me at the time, and we were all students. There were plenty of idiots around who flouted formality. Thing is, we were also

in the general class, so we figured high society had nothing to do with us.”

Dorothea’s expression turned melancholy as they mused about their time in the academy. “I preferred to be alone, so I have few memories like that myself. Looking back on it, I missed the opportunity to talk to so many people. Had I done so then, I might not find myself at such a loss now.”

“Huh? What do you mean by that?” Nicks was puzzled. *What’s she trying to say? Is she implying she wants us to be friends? Nah, there’s no way.*

The two of them had the worst first encounter that it was possible to have. For her to seek his friendship was nothing short of absurd. Instead of jumping to conclusions, Nicks waited patiently for her to continue.

Dorothea took in a shaky breath and exhaled slowly, trying to calm her nerves. She plucked up her courage with a determined expression and said, “Lord Nicks, could you possibly afford me one more chance?”

“Chance?” he echoed unthinkingly until the meaning sank in. “Wait, *that* kind of chance?!” It took him a moment to really understand her request, but when he did, he was shocked.

“I mean it. I truly have developed feelings for you. Please, I beg you, give me one more chance.”

“Uh, what?! But, err...remember? I told you already: I want to live a relaxed life with my future wife, and that means our ideas of marriage don’t match at all.”

Dorothea was a beautiful woman. That was indisputable. However, she had also openly proclaimed her pet fetish. Nicks was not on board with that.

Rather than agree that they were incompatible, Dorothea earnestly declared, “The person who falls in love first is the loser. I don’t mind if I must become your pet. Quite the contrary, in fact. I’m happy to become the wife you desire, my lord.”

“B-but I don’t think you should push yourself to do something you’re uncomfortable with. They say that it’s poison for the soul to suppress things, and stuff like that...”

And anyway, he thought, there's no way I could ever treat my future wife like my pet! I'd go crazy even trying!

Desperate as he was to wriggle out of this situation somehow, he was trapped in the heart of the Roseblades' stronghold: their castle. His eyes darted to the balcony's exit, but a curtain had been drawn over it. He caught sight of a silhouette through the glass window.

Dorothea clasped her hands together and lowered her gaze. Tears trickled down her cheeks. "Then what can I possibly do? How can I convince you to accept me?"

"W-well, uh, for now, I think you should wipe your tears! Besides, um...your family wouldn't allow this, I'm sure. I was disrespectful to you once before."

"The same could be said for me. I carried a collar into our meeting, much as you did."

Nicks couldn't help but marvel at what a twisted conversation this was turning out to be. He had to take a moment to consider her words. Why on earth was this woman so set on having him for her partner?

"It was the first time," she said, as if reading his mind.

"Wh-what was?"

"For the first time in my life, my heart beat so fast that I didn't know what to do with myself."

Nicks's heart throbbed. She had seemed so cold and distant at first; now she was crying in front of him like a child. Unable to leave her in such a state, he threw his arms around her in a bid to comfort her. Her beauty under the silvery light of the moon was incentive enough, but her distraught state compelled him to help her as well. He was an older brother, after all. Standing by and ignoring her plight wasn't an option.

Dorothea froze rigid under his touch, shocked at the sudden contact. Their pulses quickened as one.



“Uh, um,” Nicks ventured shakily. He hadn’t thought things through before moving to embrace her. Fortunately, Dorothea soon wrapped her own arms around him in response. The two of them remained like that for a while.

“What is that big dummy doing?!” My eyes flew wide open when I peeked outside at the balcony. Nicks was standing there with his arms wrapped around Miss Dorothea. She was the furthest thing from his type! What was he *thinking*, hugging her like that?

Livia, who had peered at them with me, flushed and began to fidget. “I-I don’t think any of us expected to see him hug her so dramatically out of nowhere, did we?”

Noelle’s eyes lit up as she watched the two. “Maybe not, but it’s a picture-perfect scene. It takes a lot of courage to confess how you feel to someone you’re in love with.” Her cheeks were bright red too. I assumed the scene reminded her of her own situation in the past.

“I thought the two of you were alike, but what a surprise... Lord Nicks ended up making the first move,” Angie commented. She gave me a sidelong glance. “You could learn a thing or two from him, Leon.”

“If you ask me, it looks like he got caught up in the moment and went with the flow.”

No way would Nicks make such a bold move on a girl under ordinary circumstances. Someone must have used some kind of sorcery to disrupt his mental faculties. That had to be it.

Angie let out a small sigh of exasperation, but then she turned to look over her shoulder.

Earl Roseblade was standing there behind us. He didn’t sound the least bit surprised by what I considered an earthshaking development. “Oh dear, seems my Dorothea isn’t one to be underestimated. What a shock! I never dreamed she’d already developed feelings for a man.” His voice

boomed loud enough through the venue that my parents came scrambling over.

“I could see this happening with Leon, but Nicks of all people?!” my dad said with a gasp.

Okay, I get it. Nicks is a super by-the-books kinda guy, so him getting cozy with a girl like this is a real bombshell. But why bring me into this?!

My mom covered her mouth with her hand, disguising her slack-jawed gape. She was too taken aback to even react to the sight before her.

“I-I’m terribly sorry about this,” my dad said to the earl. He was expressing his guilt that his son was putting his hands on the earl’s precious daughter.

Earl Roseblade was perfectly calm in comparison. “My daughter can hardly be blamed for having her heart stolen by the very knight who saved her life. Let’s give the two of them some privacy.” He gathered my family and shooed everyone back to the party.

“It’s obvious what’s going on here,” Angie said once he was gone, crossing her arms over her chest. “You intended for the two of them to be alone like this from the start.”

“Huh? Why do you say that?” I asked.

“Because Dorothea is head over heels for Nicks.”

“She is? But he already told her that the whole collar business was a lie, didn’t he? What reason does she have to fall for him?”

All three girls shook their heads, fed up with my evident cluelessness. *You really don’t get it, do you?* their faces seemed to say.

Livia kindly stepped in to explain, “Mr. Leon, many girls dream of having a knight sweep in and rescue them from danger.”

I nodded. “Yeah, I’ve heard of that before.”

Noelle leaned forward, fingers steepled. Her voice was dreamy as she admitted, “I know exactly how she feels. If a guy puts his life on the line to come to your rescue, you can’t help but think about him.” She darted a few glances my way, likely thinking of our time together in the Republic.

I did a pretty fine job back then, if I do say so myself.

Miss Deirdre wandered over to join the conversation. “I’ve experienced it myself, back when I was being attacked by the Principality’s military. Leon really proved how reliable he is during that conflict.”

“What a coincidence,” Angie said, a hand perched on her hip. “I remember that—Leon saved me as well. But let’s dispense with the nostalgia. You sure went out of your way to set this up.”

“Oh? Whatever could you be talking about?” Miss Deirdre feigned ignorance, but I spied the grin behind the shadow of her folding fan.

“You made sure Clarice was too preoccupied to interfere. Then you set it up so Lord Nicks and Dorothea would spend time together and eventually venture out to the balcony. The moon is beautiful tonight, giving it a romantic atmosphere. All a girl has to do is show a little weakness, and any normal man will find himself with his arms around her before he can think better of it.”

My jaw dropped. “You gotta be kidding. She was acting the whole time?” I took another look out the window at the two. I’d thought Nicks had been completely duped.

“I gave them a simple opportunity to be alone together,” Miss Deirdre protested, not about to let her older sister’s honor be stained by false accusations. “The rest I left up to them. It’s hurtful you would even imply that it’s an act.”

I wasn’t sure who to believe.

“You allow others to sway your opinion far too much,” Luxion observed, sounding entirely disinterested with this topic.

“Sh-shut up, okay? This kinda stuff isn’t my strong suit.”

“You need not tell me that. I am deeply aware that when it comes to matters of romance, you don’t have a single strong suit in your closet.”

Obnoxious little jerk. Every time you open your mouth, you say way more than you need to.

Chapter 7: Earl Roseblade

THE FOLLOWING DAY, our whole family gathered in one of the castle's many drawing rooms. We circled around Nicks, who sat on one of the sofas with his head in his hands.

"Nicks, what were you thinking, putting your arms around an unmarried girl like that?!" Dad demanded. He hadn't stopped panicking over the situation. My brother's actions would have been fine had this been some ordinary girl, but *this* girl was an earl's daughter. An unmarried earl's daughter, as my dad had pointed out.

"It wasn't like what you're thinking," Nicks swore to us. "I just couldn't leave her be, not when she was so sad. And she looked so beautiful last night."

His justification was that she'd looked too weak and vulnerable for him not to act. Unsurprisingly, the family looked at him with cold reproach.

"I'll bet it was all calculated," Jenna said.

Finley nodded. "Yeah, I can totally see that. Get the mood just right, and you've got victory in the palm of your hand."

They both seemed convinced that Nicks had fallen for Miss Dorothea's trap. After all, Nicks was in no position to easily approach the earl's daughter under normal circumstances.

"Now that I look back on it," Jenna said, "there were a bunch of things that seemed unnatural about last night."

Nicks jerked his head up. "If you knew something was afoot, you could've told me!"

"As if I've got any interest in your lousy love life. Anyway, how come the men in our family are so popular? Leon was one thing, but now it turns out Nicks is in the same boat. Is there just, like, something about you two that magnetizes women from the upper crust or something?"

Finley plopped down on the couch. She studied Colin, her head cocked. “I guess we should expect Colin to get hitched to some high-class girl too, huh?”

“M-me, get married? N-no way.”

Seeing how flustered the very suggestion made Colin drove Finley to tease him some more. She slid closer to him and prodded the tip of his nose. “Nah, that’d never happen for a little kid like you. You’re such a spineless little wimp, always hiding behind Noelle’s back.”

“Am not!”

Their conversation threatened to devolve into a petty spat, so our mom pulled them apart. “We’re guests here, don’t you dare start fighting. Honestly! Why are our children so unruly?”

Finley began sulking.

“You’re as much of a kid as he is, picking fights like that,” Jenna said with a snicker.

“Proves I’m still young. Unlike you,” Finley sniped back.

“What’d you just say?!”

“Only the truth! Remember yesterday? The second you said you were fresh out of graduation, all the guys left. Meanwhile, there were some super-hot guys who knew I hadn’t attended the academy yet. They still stuck around to talk to me.”

“I-If they’re myopic enough to choose a kid like you over me, then they’ve got no taste.”

“I think it’s the opposite,” Finley countered. “They know there’s no hope for the future if they pick you, so they’ve got enough sense to pick someone like me who’s got future promise.”

I could guess why they left, actually. My sister was a baron’s daughter. Since she’d just graduated, that meant she was from the generation of spoiled, insufferable aristocratic girls. It was no wonder that they’d kept their distance. It wasn’t all that long ago that baron and viscount daughters went gallivanting around with demi-human slaves that they’d dubbed “personal servants.” That passed muster at the time, but since then, values had begun to slowly shift. Or perhaps it was more correct to say the

monarchy had purposefully reformed them? Whatever. What mattered was that things had changed.

Finley would soon enter the academy. Once spring break was over, she'd officially be a first year. I studied her face as she glowered at Jenna.

"Older sisters suck," I muttered to myself.

Finley was pretty awful too, to be fair. She reminded me of Marie in our previous life. It was only thanks to the time I'd spent in the Alzer Republic and Miss Louise that I'd started to change my opinion on the matter: Older sisters who weren't related to me could be decent people.

My gaze moved to Jenna. Her expression was ferocious as she glared back at our younger sister. Our mother had noticed as much for herself, which was why she had a hand over her forehead like she was battling a serious migraine.

I blurted out the first thing that popped into my head. "Is there any way we could trade Jenna for Miss Louise?" I was only speaking my mind.

"Were you not the one who said something to the effect of older sisters being a source of evil?" Luxion reminded me dutifully. "Or is Louise merely less of a threat in your estimation?"

"C'mon, just take a look at Miss Louise. Doesn't she make you think that older sisters might not be so bad? If I had a nice, doting older sister with huge breasts like her, I'd be more than happy to call her family."

Jenna stopped glaring at Finley and fixed me with a look of utter disgust instead. "You are such a creep, you know that? You want a sister who'll fulfill your sick and twisted fantasies, is that it?" She wrapped her arms around herself protectively and inched away from me. Apparently, she'd misinterpreted what I said to mean I wanted a sexual relationship with my sister.

You have nothing to fear on that front, trust me.

"Don't worry, no one is interested in you sexually. Seeing you naked wouldn't excite me in the least," I told her.

"Oh? What if it was this Louise girl?"

I shook my head. "I don't see her that way. Anyway, that's really uncalled for, asking how I'd feel seeing her naked."

“Might I remind you,” Luxion interjected, “that you were the first to make such an uncalled-for remark to your own sister?”

“Yeah, ’cause she’s my actual sister. This is how I’m supposed to treat her,” I said with a cackle.

The rest of my family looked thoroughly fed up with me, having seen me pull this time and again. But it was my mother, in particular, who glowered at the very mention of Miss Louise.

Dad cleared his throat and tried to change the subject. “Ahem, at any rate, we’re lucky the earl turned a blind eye. Nicks and I will go to apologize. The rest of you, mind yourselves in the meantime. You especially, Leon!”

“Huh? Me?”

“Don’t make this mess any bigger than it already is. You hear me? I forbid it!”

I shrugged. “I make it my business to be well behaved. If you’re gonna warn anyone to ‘mind their manners,’ it ought to be Jenna and Finley.” I shot a look at the troublemaking duo.

Both of my sisters stared back at me with a mix of confusion and annoyance. They kept quiet, but they were probably thinking, *What right do you have to say that, after all the problems you’ve caused the family in the past?*

“You’d think I’d expect this absolute dimwit behavior from you by now,” Jenna said. “But you really are an idiot.”

Finley nodded. “Yeah, we’ve got basic common sense unlike *someone* here. Why not take a second look at yourself before you start blaming others?”

These two really irk me.

Louise had improved my stance on older sisters, but I couldn’t say the same for younger sisters. Finley and Marie were living proof that they were evil incarnate.

Since my old man and Nicks were off to give their apologies, I left my seat on the couch as well. They each looked at me suspiciously.

“What?” I said. “I’m going with you. I am a marquess, remember? My title might come in handy here.”

I was a marquess in name only, granted, but it would be better than nothing.

Dad and Nicks waffled back and forth over the decision before finally agreeing to let me tag along.

“I couldn’t be more pleased to have a son-in-law like you!”

We met with Earl Roseblade in one of the castle’s sitting rooms. It was expensively furnished; I took the opulence as a statement, a way for the Roseblades to flaunt their wealth. As men from a poor barony, we found the luxuries in this room overwhelming, but Earl Roseblade welcomed us in with an enormous smile stretched across his face. He spread his arms open wide as he faced Nicks.

Nicks was so flabbergasted that he stood there with his mouth ajar for a moment before reality sunk in. “S-son-in-law?!”

“Why, yes. The only reason you could have embraced my daughter on the balcony like that is because you chose to accept her as your betrothed. Unless I am mistaken?” The earl beamed from ear to ear the entire time he spoke, but the unspoken implication of his words was clear. *Surely you’re not so irresponsible as to put your hands on my daughter and then refuse to marry her, are you?*

My dad was a panicked mess already and seemed unlikely to be much help, but that didn’t stop him from trying his best.

“C-come now, Earl Roseblade. You can’t seriously intend for them to marry? We may be fellow aristocrats, but we’re rural countryside folk. And...and your family is far more respectable than ours.”

This world retained a status hierarchy, meaning that marriage came with a host of cumbersome rules. Some people could and did marry beyond their status, but others renounced all their honor and prestige to elope, thereby losing everything in the process.

Incidentally, the five idiots were an example of the latter. They had abandoned their entire lives for Marie—although in their case, they'd been duped by her helpless heroine act. Losing their families' support had left them in pretty dire straits. The perpetrator of all of this, Marie, found herself in the unenviable position of having to care for five unemployed, penniless buffoons, though, so it was actually kind of funny.

Still. There were always exceptions to any rule.

Earl Roseblade shot a brief look in my direction. "There's no need for you to worry. Nicks's younger brother is a marquess. There isn't a man in this kingdom who could publicly complain about this match, not when my daughter's betrothed hails from the same family as the hero who climbed his way to the rank of marquess in a single generation."

The continuous promotions that had raised me up to this empty title had, in the process, made the hierarchy murky for both my family and me. I felt bad for bringing this trouble on Nicks. The least I could do was argue on his behalf.

"Can Miss Dorothea survive living in the countryside? It's nothing like the city. We really do live in the middle of nowhere," I said.

My dad and Nicks bobbed their heads over and over in agreement. This was a genuine concern. Could a born-and-bred city girl like her hack it out where we lived? Sure, we were all from the same kingdom, but that kingdom was vast enough that the quality of a person's living changed drastically depending on where they resided. It wasn't like Japan, where you could live anywhere in the country and still have access to electricity, gas, and water. The girls at the academy detested rural nobility for that reason.

Earl Roseblade didn't seem the least bit concerned about the issues we raised. "Dorothea is prepared for that. She said she could live wherever if it meant being Nicks's bride. Should it become necessary, our family will happily provide monetary aid to support the two of you."

His willingness to loosen the coin purse for his daughter and give to our family was a welcome proposal, but I smelled something fishy. I knew commenting as much would be rude, but there was no way I could hold my tongue.

“Your offer is a tad too good to be true. I can’t help but think you have some underlying motive here,” I said, nervous though I was to voice my concerns.

The earl’s guards found my words highly offensive, apparently—they reached for their weapons at once. Fortunately, the earl lifted a hand to stop them.

“It’s wise not to jump at a promising proposal without first examining it. Those who thoughtlessly reach for the treasure before them tend to lose limbs, you know. I commend you on your caution,” he said. Contrary to his guards, the earl sounded pleased with my reaction.

Earl Roseblade turned his back toward us and hesitated, as if struggling over whether or not to respond honestly to my doubts. He breathed a small sigh, then faced us again, looking more troubled than he had moments ago. “Considering our houses will soon be inextricably tied together, it makes no sense to hide things from you. Besides, it’s my understanding that you and your family are already well aware of my daughter’s eccentric preferences, yes?”

Nicks frowned. I guessed that he was remembering what happened when he first met Dorothea. With a nod, he answered, “Y-yes. Of course, I have no intention of telling anyone else.”

“I expected as much. *Family* have a duty to hide that which might otherwise stain their honor.” He put special emphasis on family as if to drive home to Nicks that he was already one of them and therefore would never share a secret the family had been careful to conceal from outsiders.

“B-but I’m not a good match for her,” Nicks insisted. “I’m not at all worthy of Miss Dorothea. Leon is the amazing one in our family, not me.”

“Yes, it is important to recognize one’s own powerlessness. I appreciate what an upstanding and honest man you are!”

“But you do realize I’ve got no achievements to my name, don’t you?”

Not one to be easily deterred, the earl replied, “I am investing in the potential I see in you. You demonstrated your abilities when you quashed those air pirates, did you not? You saved my daughters’ lives, no less! That is sufficient enough to consider an achievement in my book!”

Nicks shook his head. “We’re a poor family. Your daughter will only suffer living with us!”

“Nothing to worry about! The Roseblades will do everything in our power to support you. Whether it’s men, money, or goods, feel free to reach out to us—we will happily provide!”

“Even as an adventurer, I’m average at best. I haven’t accomplished a single thing!”

Like most guys, Nicks had become an adventurer while he attended the academy, but he hadn’t conquered the depths of the dungeon as I had. Nor had he discovered treasure. He hadn’t done anything much of note at all. The Roseblades valued adventurers above all else, which should have been enough to disqualify Nicks even if they thought he was a good man at heart. Yet Earl Roseblade remained firm in the face of our efforts to dissuade him.

“Oh, you wish to try your hand at adventuring, do you? In that case, you should join one of the projects we’ve been planning. We’ve been recruiting people to form a team that will set out to discover new floating islands. Should they succeed, I’d be delighted to give you all the credit for it.”

“N-no! I couldn’t possibly do that. Getting credit for something has no meaning unless you do it by yourself.”

“What’s this?” The earl gasped. “You wish to do it all yourself? I can see already that you’re a fine adventurer indeed, Nicks!”

No matter what my older brother said, Earl Roseblade saw fit to interpret it the best possible way. Was it possible they were misunderstanding each other? No way. That couldn’t be it.

Luxion, floating beside me as usual, immediately sensed what was going on. “Judging by the way this conversation is playing out, Earl Roseblade is determined to lay claim to your brother one way or another.”

“Seems that way,” I agreed. “Nicks might not be able to wriggle out of this one.”

If I were to interpret the real meaning underlying this whole conversation, the earl was essentially saying, “Try to pull whatever stunt

you like, but you shan't get away from me!" Nicks was so bewildered by the older man's reality-defying interpretations of everything he said that it put him on the back foot, leaving him panicked and disoriented.

"You will still be staying here for a while yet, won't you?" Earl Roseblade asked. "That will be a good opportunity for the two of you to become acquainted in the meantime. Men, one of you fetch Dorothea for me and have her show Nicks around the castle."

"Yes, my lord." One of the knights hurried out of the room to see to his master's command.

My old man, who hadn't managed to keep up with the whole conversation, finally managed to blurt out, "What am I supposed to do now?"

My sentiments exactly, I thought.

Nicks and Miss Dorothea toured the castle while the rest of us ventured into the inner courtyard where Miss Deirdre had invited us to join her for tea. A table and chairs had been laid out for us in advance, so we took our seats and enjoyed the piping hot tea. The snacks were a delicious match for the tea, but my attention was focused more on the topic of conversation: Nicks. The atmosphere around us wasn't dark, but it was a far cry from cheerful.

"Suffice to say Nicks is trapped at this point, I guess?"

Scores of people at the party had spotted Nicks embracing Miss Dorothea. Many others heard about it secondhand. Rumors were circulating already, with people whispering that it was only a matter of time before the two married. Those with their ears to the ground had suspected such a result from the moment the Roseblades came all the way out to visit the Bartforts.

Miss Clarice was none too pleased that things had worked out, particularly after being so deliberately intercepted at the party. "Such a disrespectful house, treating their own saviors this way. It was a pretty rotten thing to do to my family too, considering the Atlees dispatched ships

and manpower to come to your aid during the attack.” She wasn’t actually angry; she just took it personally that the crowd had corralled her in so that she couldn’t meddle.

Miss Deirdre smiled at her. “My family had prior business with the Bartforts. You are the one who stuck your nose in, if you’ll recall. I suspect your family advised you to investigate what was going on between us, didn’t they?”

Miss Clarice lifted her cup and took a sip of tea without bothering to respond at first. The air at the table wasn’t particularly tense, but I was tired of these games of theirs. They were constantly trying to get a read on each other while beating around the bush.

“I hate to say this in front of you, Miss Deirdre,” I said, trying to steer the conversation back to the original topic, “but I’ll fully support my brother if he decides to refuse this marriage.”

If Nicks was adamant about not going through with it, I had every intention of helping him. Much to my surprise, Miss Deirdre didn’t admonish me for my steadfast resolve.

“So you’re saying that you won’t oppose it as long as he accepts it, right? What about you, Angelica? Will you interfere?”

Everyone’s attention turned to Angie, who quietly set her cup down.

“I will follow whatever Leon decides. However, should you try anything untoward with Leon...we will show you no mercy. Deirdre, you’d better satisfy yourself with this one victory and leave it there. The same goes for you, Clarice. Don’t go filling your head with any funny expectations. I am being entirely serious about this, for the record.” She pinned the two with an intimidating look. Her eyes shone like rubies.

Neither Miss Deirdre nor Miss Clarice looked particularly bothered by her spiel, choosing to give wordless smiles. Personally, I was curious why my name had even come up.

“Hey, Luxion, any idea why she mentioned me?”

“Your resolute cluelessness is refreshing in its way, given the circumstances. You do realize what I mean by that, I hope? The atmosphere

here is so suffocating and tense that as grim a presence as yours can provide some light in the dark.”

Whenever I failed to grasp what was going on, Luxion would hit me with his usual snide remarks. I was so used to it that I shot back at him on instinct.

“I’m a simple, innocent young man. These kinds of situations, where each party is trying to suss out the other’s intentions, are pretty stifling to me. But it makes sense for someone like you to feel right at home, hm?”

“Precisely what are you attempting to imply?”

“Just that, since you’re an AI, you’re calculating and underhanded enough to enjoy this kinda thing.”

“Regrettably, I cannot begin to compare to how devious you are, Master. You have some nerve, trying to call yourself simple and innocent.”

Angie gave a small sigh as we squabbled. “It seems Leon’s already bored of this, so let’s cut the conversation here. As for the potential couple, we’ll leave the matter in their hands. We’ll watch from the sidelines without interfering.”

We’d decided to leave the matter up to Nicks and Miss Dorothea, but as aristocrats ourselves, was it okay to be so hands-off? I was grateful that Angie had suggested it, to be sure, it was just that the high society I pictured in my head was far more fussy about things like marriages. I could think of plenty of cases where the aristocracy’s rules were more trouble than they were worth.

I had managed to obtain Luxion, and in the process of inserting myself into numerous conflicts and going on a number of rampages, I’d ended up with a much higher status than the one I had started with. For better or worse, I’d bypassed all the weighty formalities and expectations that came with my rank. I was convinced high society was a way bigger pain than it had proven so far.

Well, there are ties of obligation even outside of marriage. As much as I’ve dodged trouble, it’s right at our doorstep now.

“It doesn’t matter if we get involved or not, huh? Boy, aristocratic marriages are less strict than I thought,” I mused out loud.

Angie's eyes narrowed. "More precisely, anything involving you tends to be an exception to the rule. But anyway, can't we talk about something more entertaining? Leon seems sick of devious scheming. Let's find something else to discuss."

It was sweet of her to want to change the topic on my behalf. Although...did she also take a nonchalant shot at Miss Deirdre and Miss Clarice in the process, or was I just imagining things? It felt like a subtle dig at me too, for grumbling about how everyone was walking on eggshells with each other.

Livia clapped her hands, having come up with the perfect idea. "Then I'd like to hear more about this floating islands business! Mr. Leon filled me in about it, but I hear that the Roseblades are trying to search for new, unexplored islands? Is it really that easy to do?"

"It's not simple at all," Miss Deirdre said. "Finding unclaimed land masses drifting about is terribly difficult as of late. But if we find one of suitable size, we have it brought back to our region and secured to our territory, thereby expanding our lands."

"Even the smaller islands are pretty massive, aren't they?" Livia asked. "Can you really just bring one back like that? I've never seen it done, so I find it so hard to believe."

"We use magic to manipulate the island's Suspension Stone so we may haul it back here, but I assure you, that process is no easy feat. Failure often results in a serious disaster."

The Suspension Stones she mentioned were a type of mineral that ignored all laws of gravity. One could quite easily construct an airship with such an item; the stones took care of keeping the vessel afloat. Once you installed a propulsion system, the airship would be all set to go.

Miss Deirdre went on to explain, "We cannot take just any floating island we find, you understand. If the island is little more than a barren wasteland, it won't provide much value to us and our people even if we were to haul it back to our lands. Those types are relatively easy to discover, in fact. What we're after is one with fertile soil."

"Barren islands still have their use," Miss Clarice interjected. "You can remove their Suspension Stone and sell it to make money. Plus,

sometimes you'll find other types of minerals on those islands. An island's value comes down to how you use it."

Even Angie seemed invested in this conversation. "If it's that costly to have one hauled back, what about creating a survey organization?" She was proposing the formation of a specific group designated for scouting and retrieving any potentially high-resource islands.

"Have you any idea what it would cost to maintain an organization of the size you're proposing? Having them comb those empty islands would be a waste of time. You could recover the Suspension Stones from the dud islands they dredged up, but that wouldn't bring you out of the red," said Miss Deirdre.

"It seems worth trying to me," Angie insisted. "The organization might fail a number of times, but a single success might bring you out of the red completely, right? There's no issue as long as you end up making some profit by the end."

While the three of them got heated and launched into all kinds of proposals and ideas, the person who'd asked the initial question—Livia—sat there with a troubled look, unable to get a word in edgewise. Since no one else would engage her, I decided I would.

"Why the interest in floating islands?" I asked.

"Miss Noelle is the one who's taken an interest in them lately, to be honest. You know how things are for Sappie, right? Poor thing has been trapped in a pot for so long, and with no end in sight."

I glanced at Noelle. She had finished draining the last of the tea from her cup and was setting it down. She must have overheard us because she immediately began to explain the reason for her sudden fascination.

"Yeah, it's like she said...but you see, where we plant Sappie is super important. I was thinking that if we found a really good, suitable island for him, maybe we could plant him there."

The future would inevitably bring some dispute about who had rights to Sappie, so where we planted him was of the utmost importance. It could become an issue for our entire family. It'd be crushing for our future children and grandchildren to quarrel with their own kin about who had the rights to the tree.

“I have already investigated a number of floating islands and claimed them for possible future use,” Luxion announced.

“What? Seriously?”

“Yes. It seemed necessary to find new land to repurpose as your territory, Master.”

“That’s fair, I guess. I did offer the paradise I built before as tribute...”

I’d once had a floating island of my own with its own hot springs. Alas, I had handed it over to the kingdom for Marie and her idiot brigade to use while they were under house arrest. Luxion had built that utopia for me so I could lead the slow-paced life I’d always dreamed of, and I’d lost it all thanks to Marie and her entourage.

I chatted with Livia and Noelle while Miss Deirdre and Miss Clarice stole glances in our direction. Luxion focused his gaze on them. The way he silently stared them down provoked my curiosity—I couldn’t help but ask, “Why are you looking at those two?”

“...No reason.”

Elsewhere, Nicks had taken a seat in a separate courtyard alongside Dorothea on a bench, leaving a respectable gap between them.

“He’s really put me through the wringer, you know!”

“Oh my.”

At some point, their conversation had devolved into Nicks venting to her. He’d forgotten his manners and defaulted to the usual pattern of speech he used when speaking with family.

“He would get up to such crazy stuff at the academy that everyone else would give me dirty looks just for being related to him. I was the scumbag older brother, or at least that’s how they treated me. They had it all wrong! I’m just a normal guy! He’s the black sheep of the family!”

“That must have been hard on you.”

“Guys resented me for my relation to him, and girls found me terrifying. Things only got worse when Leon started getting all these new titles and rankings... It made it impossible to get married.”

Being Leon’s older brother had presented Nicks with a long list of problems. It was a testament to his moral, upstanding character that he never considered using Leon’s position to his own personal advantage.

Though her fingers trembled with trepidation, Dorothea reached over and gently touched Nicks’s hand. “I-I would never be led astray by the opinions of other people like that.”

“Miss Dorothea...” Nicks’s cheeks heated up as her hand squeezed around his.

“Nicks isn’t half as opposed to this as he’s been acting! I can’t believe him. He’s got the rest of us on tenterhooks wondering how the heck this is going to turn out, while he’s having the time of his life going on a date with her!”

I had ordered Luxion to check in on the two to see how things were going. A recording of their outing was playing on the table in front of us. The girls were glued to it like it was the best entertainment they’d ever seen.

Miss Deirdre thumbed away a couple of tears. “I can’t believe my sister, with all of her weird quirks, is enjoying a normal date! In the past, she’d have forced a collar on the man and led him around on a leash.”

She seemed deeply moved by the whole situation, as ordinary and unremarkable as it was. I was moved to point out something that had been bothering me.

“Miss Deirdre, I seem to recall you saying something before about wanting to make me your pet too.” It was during our school trip, when we first encountered the Principality of Fanoss.

“I never heard anything about this,” Angie grumbled, leveling a glance at Miss Deirdre. Her eyes then flitted toward Livia, who spilled the

details in full.

“She did say that. Mr. Leon said that he couldn’t abandon you, but he didn’t care what happened to everyone else. Miss Deirdre remarked that she liked his brazen attitude then.”

Angie’s eyes darted back to me. She was blushing. “O-oh, was that what happened? W-well, yes...she shouldn’t have said that.”

Please stop. You’re embarrassing me now. I was so desperate back then to save Angie that I’d blurted out a bunch of things that I wouldn’t normally have said. I covered my face with both hands, unable to withstand the shame any longer.

Livia grinned. “Even men dream about being a dazzling knight and swooping in to save their princess, don’t they? Mr. Leon might act otherwise, but he did his best to charge in and rescue you, Angie.”

I kept my lips tightly sealed.

Angie was embarrassed enough that she cleared her throat. “Ahem, Livia, you can stop there. Even Leon’s at a loss for what to say.”

“I guess you’re right. Really, though, he looked so heroic back then!”

My whole face was aflame by this point. Miss Deirdre and Miss Clarice stared at me before shooting dirty looks at Livia. They must have been annoyed to hear her gush so openly.

“Oh, they’re holding hands!” Noelle squeaked, drawing our attention back to the projection. “Your brother sure looks happy. I’ve gotta say, there’s no denying it—they look perfect together.”

Livia smiled as she watched them. “You’re right. They seem to be having a lovely time.”

I lifted my face to catch a glimpse of what they were talking about. Honestly, seeing how much Nicks was enjoying himself made me a bit jealous. I had my own adorable fiancées, yes, but this guy only had one to contend with. After being promised to so many girls, the pure, monogamous love my brother faced was almost blinding in its innocence—like staring straight into the sun.

To be real with you, I didn’t regret promising to wed any of the girls I had. Not for one second. But that didn’t stop me from being jealous.

As if to hammer the final nail in the coffin—morbid though that sounded—Luxion announced, “The pulses of both parties have intensified considerably, and their body temperatures are rising.”

“Luxion, spell it out for me, would you? What’s that mean?” I said.

“They are both in a state of excitement.”

“Not disgust? No hatred? No negative emotion of any kind?”

“The possibility seems considerably slim, given the facts.”

After pausing for a moment to digest that, I said, “Okay then.”

Everyone who’d listened in raised their eyebrows at me, as if they had expected something more supportive or affirming. Their criticisms aside, Nicks’s delighted reaction and the data Luxion had collected said everything, even after accounting for either party putting up a facade to maintain appearances. A short while ago, Nicks had vehemently refused the idea of marriage. He’d claimed that they didn’t suit each other and grumbled about how twisted her personality was. His enchanted visage right now was nothing short of shocking.

What’s wrong with him? Seriously.

“He whined plenty about this whole arrangement, but even he goes weak at the knees in front of a beauty like her. I was gonna help him out if he turned her down, but...I’m over it now.”

My blasé attitude prompted Luxion to ask, “Then you approve of him marrying Dorothea?”

“Why not? He seems happy.”

They looked like an innocent young couple in the projection.

I left my seat and made for the exit of the courtyard.

Luxion called after me. “Where are you going, Master?”

“To see my parents. Gotta tell them how happy those two look. Bet the news will have them feeling relieved.”

Stupid Nicks, causing all this fuss over nothing.

Nicks made his way back after parting ways with Dorothea. For some reason, Earl Roseblade was waiting for him in the room that had been set aside for the Bartforts.

“My son!” he said to Nicks, delighted.

“Earl Roseblade? Um, what are you doing here?”

The earl approached Nicks and seized his right hand in both of his own, whereupon he shook it vigorously. “I heard the good news. It pleases me to know that you’re prepared to see this engagement through.”

“...Sorry?” Nicks blurted in surprise.

The rest of the family had made a circle around him. They were clapping. His parents had tears in their eyes.

“Nicks, if this is what you want, I’ve got no complaints.”

“Huh? Dad?”

“I do worry a bit about how hard of a time you’ll have being with a lady from such a prestigious earldom, but you have always been so responsible and put together. I’m sure I have nothing to worry about, do I? Congratulations, my son.”

“Mom?! What’re you talking about?” Nicks gaped at all of them, unable to mentally digest what was happening.

Earl Roseblade eagerly explained, “The marquess—that is, your younger brother—told us everything. If it’s true that you’re not opposed to the union, then do tell me yourself! I must say, you are a very earnest young man and not one to dally with other women. It gives me peace of mind as a father to know my daughter will be in your care.”

“H-hold up, I haven’t said anything about going through with this,” Nicks insisted. Yes, he had gotten caught up in the moment when he was talking to Dorothea earlier. The notion of being with her wasn’t entirely displeasing. Still, he hadn’t uttered a word about going through with the marriage yet. And how could anyone have possibly overheard their conversation?

How'd everyone know we had such a great time together? he wondered. He was at a complete loss.

Earl Roseblade remained smiling, even as his eyes narrowed. His grip on Nicks's hand tightened painfully. "Do you have some sort of problem with my daughter?"

"N-no, absolutely not. I just don't think I'm fit to be with her..."

That was his outward excuse. Inwardly, he thought, *She's an amazing person, but our personalities don't match at all.*

Earl Roseblade beamed with delight. "Then there's no problem! I am happy to assure you that you are plenty fit to be with my daughter!" He was making it clear that he wouldn't let anyone, including Nicks, complain about the marriage.

Why is this happening? As Nicks questioned his sorry position, he spotted Leon in the corner of his eye. His little brother was clapping and smirking. *Don't tell me...you're the one behind this?!*

"Leon, I hope I'm mistaken here...but are you the evil mastermind here?"

"Sorry, what? Evil mastermind? The two of you were obviously enjoying yourselves! So much so that I figured I'd tell our parents. *They* assumed you made up your mind, so here we are."

"How did you know we were enjoying ourselves? You weren't there spying on us, were you?!"

Luxion answered this question on Leon's behalf. "I reported on your date to Master, relaying all of the data I collected. From your increased heart rates, elevated body temperatures, and the expressions on both of your faces, I deduced that the two of you were in an excited state."

"You had a hand in this too, Luxion?! You should've stopped Leon from sticking his nose in like you normally do!" Nicks snapped.

"It was clear that you were falling for Dorothea even from an outsider's perspective. Angelica and the other girls concurred, so I doubt any error is present in my judgment. If you are dissatisfied with my findings, I can display the data on your pulse while the two of you were

holding hands. You were sexually aroused by Dorothea at that moment, correct?”

Did Nicks’s heart pound when she squeezed his hand? Well, yeah, maybe it did, but the way Luxion put it made it insanely embarrassing.

“There’s other ways you could word that, y’know!”

Earl Roseblade’s grin grew wider, hearing all of this. “Aroused by my Dorothea, were you? I admit I have mixed feelings hearing about that. I am her father, after all. But what matters is that you hold my daughter in a positive regard! I will begin preparations for an official engagement immediately.”

“B-but I’m not mentally ready,” Nicks stammered. He couldn’t keep up with how rapidly everything around him was developing.

Leon shook his head and sighed, as if annoyed with how indecisive Nicks was being. “You’re such a wuss.”

You’re the last person I wanna hear that from! You’re the biggest wuss around!

He and everyone else present—Angie, Livia, and Noelle, as well as the rest of their family—thought the same thing, but Luxion summarized their collective sentiment in one succinct sentence.

“Master, you have absolutely no right to say that.”

Chapter 8: The Truth Behind Sappie

DOROTHEA SAT ON HER BED, head tipped back to stare up at the ceiling. All she had done today was escort Nicks around the castle, but her heart continued to pound long after she'd bid him farewell. Had she done a good job? He hadn't come to hate her, had he? As such thoughts plagued her mind, she was occasionally overwhelmed with fresh waves of embarrassment. Her mind picked out small slip-ups she had made, and then she lamented over why she'd made each mistake.

She was reflecting alone in this manner when a knock fell upon the door and startled her.

"Wh-what is it?" Dorothea called back hesitantly.

"It's me, Deirdre."

"The door's unlocked," she said, quickly fixing her posture.

Deirdre entered with a huge smile on her face. "I've got good news for you, dear sister. Our family is moving forward with an official engagement."

"Bwah?!" Dorothea let out a strange, strangled cry of surprise.

Deirdre walked over and squeezed Dorothea's hands in her own. "There are a number of formalities to be seen to, but I can promise you that your engagement is nearly finalized."

"B-but why? Um, did Lord Nicks say anything?"

Engagement hadn't so much as come up as a topic during their castle tour, hence her conviction that she'd failed to win him over. Hearing that they were on the cusp of an official engagement threw her for a loop.

"The groom himself has yet to affirm his feelings, but you should speak with him directly about that." Deirdre paused before adding, "And congratulations."

"Th-thank you."

“I can hardly believe you’re getting married! I worried that, if worse came to worst, you might wind up a spinster. Anyway, what do you plan to do about the whole collar business? Your future partner seems less than keen on the idea, so I’m afraid I can’t recommend you go through with it...”

“There’s no need anymore.”

“Oh?” Deirdre hadn’t expected that response. She looked curious about this sudden change of heart.

Sensing as much, Dorothea explained, “I realized that the two of us can be connected without all of that.”

Deirdre shrugged. “You mean through love, I assume?”

“You could put it that way, yes.”

If there is a tie out there that can bind a person more powerfully than a chain, then... Dorothea’s thoughts trailed off. She hadn’t given her sister a clear answer, but that was what she yearned for: a connection more powerful and unbreakable than any chain.

“You stupid wuss. You stabbed me in the back!”

I was on Einhorn’s deck. Nicks was grabbing me by the collar of my shirt.

“Come on!” I snapped back. “You two looked perfectly happy alone together! Everyone else said the same thing, that you’d definitely fallen for her!”

Even Angie had said as much. There could be no mistake. The two were so sickeningly lovey-dovey that a less-perceptive fellow like me picked up on it right away.

“Everyone?!” Nicks echoed back in dismay. “You’re telling me that you had a whole party together watching us?! You cross a lot of lines, Leon, but that’s low even for you!”

“I was worried about you, okay? I thought you were having a rough time! Then I look in on you and you’re genuinely enjoying yourself.”

I hoped I might find some entertainment by peeking in on them. I figured they’d both be awkward and hung up on their situation, perhaps. Much to my chagrin, they were having a blast. Why the heck did I have to be subjected to that, huh?

“You’ve been blessed so much more than I have. How can you be so freakin’ narrow-minded?!”

I huffed at him. “My mind is perfectly broad, actually. That’s why I was nice enough to throw in my support for this marriage! You should be grateful I didn’t do anything to mess it up.”

If I’d been truly jealous of him, I wouldn’t have bothered giving them my blessing. I wanted my brother to be happy, so even though it went against my usual policy, I did what I could to ensure things proceeded smoothly for them both. *How dare he imply that I’m narrow-minded?*

“Excuse the intrusion, but someone has come to see us off,” Luxion interrupted.

Nicks ripped his hands away from me and faced our unexpected guest. His whole body stiffened at the sight of her. His cheeks colored too. His feelings about her were written on his face clear as day.

Miss Dorothea was no different, nervously staring down at her feet. “Lord Nicks, I, um...I promise I will come to see you as soon as I can.”

“R-right, yeah. I, uh, will be waiting, then.”

Neither one seemed capable of speaking in fluid sentences. Their conversation ended as abruptly as it began, and Miss Dorothea retreated from the deck—for the castle, most likely. She looked back again and again, waving at Nicks each time.

Miss Deirdre was here to see us off as well. She watched her sister leave with a smile. “They are so innocent and cute, aren’t they? I blush just watching them.”

“He keeps on griping and grumbling at me, but when the woman herself shows up, he trips over himself like a buffoon,” I grumbled, cursing my brother under my breath.

Luxion's lens moved from side to side as if he was exasperatedly shaking his head. "I remind you that you were more trouble than your brother."

"That's not true at all."

"Shall we ask Angelica and the other girls for their opinions? Yes, I think that's a fine idea. Angelica, do tell us your impressions."

Angie crossed her arms. "Leon was the bigger pain. He kept waffling back and forth up until the very, very end. If we hadn't surprised him with that whole engagement ceremony, he'd have kept running from us for the rest of his life."

"I-I don't think that's true," I protested weakly.

"Well?" Angie glanced at Livia.

"Indeed, I would also like to hear Livia's opinion," said Luxion.

Livia chose her words carefully. "Well, leaving the part about whether he was a 'wuss' or not aside, I definitely agree that Leon was more difficult to handle than his brother. We admitted our feelings first, not him. It did take a lot of courage to do that, but I don't regret it in the slightest."

As much as I wanted to argue the point, I had no ground to stand on. Maybe I was worse than Nicks.

Not satisfied with merely kicking me while I was down, Luxion added, "You have a bad habit of glorifying your past behavior, Master. I assume that is why you forgot how pathetic you were back then. Noelle, perhaps you have something to add?"

Noelle gave me a reproachful look. "Oh, I do. I think you should apologize to your brother first, though."

Everyone's attention was drawn to Nicks, who stood staring after Miss Dorothea, waving his hand. I couldn't fathom how he could deny his feelings when it was so obvious to everyone watching.

"My, my," Miss Deirdre remarked. She looked deeply satisfied as she observed him. "I suppose I should take my leave too then."

As Miss Deirdre disembarked, Jenna eyed our lovestruck brother, shrugged, and expelled a sigh. "I can't believe how much he's mooning

over her.”

“Personally, I think the passion will cool itself pretty quickly,” Finley said with a shake of her head.

“You think so too, huh?” Jenna was quick to latch on and spout her own predictions about the future of Nicks’s relationship. “Right now that girl is a sweet and innocent maiden because she’s in the throes of passion, but just you wait! The sheep’s clothing is bound to come off, and you’ll see the real wolf underneath. She’ll go right back to how she was when they first met.”

“For sure,” Finley agreed. “No way can she keep up that charade forever. It’ll be a few months, tops, before she’s got him whipped.”

“I hear that your partner’s flaws show up pretty quickly after marriage. I doubt it’ll even take months!”

Their bleak conversation prompted Nicks to whip around and shout, “Can’t you girls be even a little optimistic?!”

“We’re being *realistic*. It’s for your benefit! You’d better prepare yourself now for what she’ll become. That way you won’t get hurt down the line. You ought to be grateful to us,” Jenna insisted.

Neither Nicks nor I could find a reply to her nonsense. As a last resort to make barbs at the two, I said, “You know, if you two really are girls, you could stand to be a little more romantic. It’d be a lot cuter.”

The two traded looks and snorted with laughter.

“Wh-what?” I grumbled.

Both Jenna and Finley covered their mouths as they snickered.

“Your future is even more uncertain and worrisome than his,” said Jenna. “You should take a good, hard look at reality.”

Finley agreed, “Yeah. Spend more time worrying about yourself than us.”

Their attitudes and expressions both pissed me off. While we siblings bickered and squabbled, our parents held each other’s waists and sighed.

The remaining days of spring break flew by. Before I returned to the academy, there was one other problem I had to attend to: finding a place to plant Sappie.

“Using Yumeria’s requests as a reference point, I have selected a floating island where you might plant the Sacred Tree Sapling,” Luxion said. He was dragging me out to what looked like a barren wasteland. Wherever I looked I found nothing but sand and rocks. It looked like the last place anyone would want to plant a tree.

“You sure about this? This looks like a really inhospitable environment to my eyes.”

It was the wee hours of the morning when we piled in my airship to come out here. I rubbed my eyes, still heavy with sleep, and yawned. Dawn hadn’t yet broken, and the dark sky still cast shadows around us.

“Did we really have to come *this* early?” I asked.

“Full of complaints, as always. Considering our plans for the day, I deemed early morning to be the optimal time to arrive.” Luxion had devised a schedule for me in advance. According to his calculations, I would have time left to finish everything else on my list as long as I planted Sappie early.

Miss Yumeria tagged along behind us, pushing Noelle’s wheelchair. The sapling sat safely atop Noelle’s lap as she surveyed the area for herself. She seemed to share my concerns.

“We’re really going to plant it here? We’ll be in huge trouble if it shrivels up and dies.”

As if to assuage our anxiety, Miss Yumeria puffed up her chest with confidence. This did little other than make her pronounced breasts stand out even more. Any drowsiness I’d felt vanished. My eyes zoomed to Miss Yumeria like a magnet, but seconds later Angie jabbed me in the stomach with her elbow. She was standing right next to me.

“Ouch!”

“Show some self-restraint. If you want to look at someone’s chest, ogle the girls you’re already engaged to.”

“Wait, you mean it? I can gawk at your boobs?”

“Be my guest.”

I wasn't fully awake yet, so I jumped at her proposal without a second thought. Then, the moment she gave her permission, I lost the courage to follow through. It would be arousing if the girl acted embarrassed by the attention, but if she was unbothered by it...well, I had no idea how to react to that.

“It's early. I'll refrain for now,” I said.

“You'd refrain even if it were already nighttime, I'm sure.”

I returned my attention to Miss Yumeria. She'd brought a hoe and was digging out a plot so that we could plant the sapling. The earth she struck into was hard and unyielding. I didn't know squat about horticulture and the like, but even I could tell this was no environment for plant life. There wasn't even any water nearby.

“Are we sure this is the right place?” Livia asked worriedly. “I find it hard to believe the sapling will be able to grow here.”

“I have to agree,” I said. “Luxion, are you sure about this?”

Convinced though I was that there had been a grave mistake, Luxion surprised me by replying, “My selection matches perfectly with Yumeria's own criteria.”

“Huh?”

“As barren as this place looks, the Sacred Tree Sapling will grow here. Have you forgotten? Demonic essence passes as its sustenance; it absorbs the mana in the air to mature and grow. Such factors as water and soil are important, yes, but what takes priority is that it has sufficient mana to help it flourish.”

So, basically, as long as it had the bare minimum of soil and water, it would be fine.

“Sappie's pretty incredible, huh?”

“It is a tenacious tree,” Luxion agreed.

I shook my head at him. “You could've been a little more flattering about it than that.”

We traded verbal jabs while Miss Yumeria wrapped up the last of her preparations. Noelle passed her the sapling, and she set about planting it in the spot she'd created.

I noticed that each little movement Miss Yumeria made caused her chest to jiggle and bounce. I only peeked for a split second (I swear), but that was enough for Miss Cordelia, who'd been standing behind Angie this entire time, to clear her throat. "Marquess Bartfort, your gawking is a bit too obvious."

"It's part of a man's nature to do this. Practically subconscious. I can't help it!" Even I knew that was a pathetic excuse.

Livia cupped a hand over her chin, frowning. "Men are like that, aren't they? Their eyes are drawn to a lady's chest or rear right away."

"Master focuses on the chest in particular," Luxion supplied helpfully.

"Hey!"

"Does it embarrass you to have them know that? You need not worry. You stare regularly enough that anyone in your immediate vicinity is keenly aware of your interest in breasts."

"Say what?" I checked the faces of all the people present. Each one of them nodded.

"Your gaze is too obvious," Luxion explained. "Perhaps it is only proper that a mammal such as yourself adheres so faithfully to your sexual appetite, but you *are* a human, and as such, I advise you learn more discretion. Apparent as preference for women with ample breasts is to me, I find myself embarrassed by your actions. I would kindly request you stop."

"Sorry? How come I've gotta sit here and take this lecture from you, huh?" I scowled. *How dare this rotten AI sit here and spell out my preferences for all and sundry? Keep that stuff confidential!*

"There, finished!" Miss Yumeria declared in a strident voice. She was covered in dirt, but she had successfully planted the sapling here in this empty desert.

The deed was done, but my anxiety over the choice of planting spot persisted. This place looked to be in no shape to sustain life.

“Can we really just leave it like this? Without giving it any water or nutrients?” I asked.

“This little one is tough, so it’ll be fine,” Miss Yumeria assured me.

“Tough, huh?”

Miss Yumeria set her hoe aside and crouched down in front of the sapling. “Very tough. This little one has survived for so long in an unspeakably hostile environment. Even without any nutrients to speak of, it still managed to maintain its form and delay its maturation. It’s toughed it out through the worst period of its life.”

She spoke as though she had seen its journey with her own eyes.

“You can tell all of that?” I asked skeptically.

“Umm... It’s more like I can hear its voice? Normally, this little one would be much bigger than it is right now.”

Luxion drifted closer to comment, “Yes, this tree does seem quite miraculous.”

Miss Yumeria got to her feet and planted her hands on her hips. “So we’ll have it shoot up to its proper height right here!”

“Like, because it’s going to grow over time...?” Noelle tilted her head.

“No,” said Miss Yumeria. “I’m going to have it return to its true form now.”

“You can do that?!” Noelle squeaked in surprise. The rest of us were similarly taken aback. I did know that, even among elves, Miss Yumeria possessed an exceedingly unique type of magic: She was a literal expert when it came to plants.

“Please let me handle everything. Here we go!” As soon as she finished speaking, Miss Yumeria began to dance around Sappie. Her movements were more comical than they were graceful, unfortunately.

“What is this dance?” I asked.

“I came up with it myself. I put so much thought into it, hoping it would help this little one return to its true form,” she said. Then she began to chant the same lines over and over. “Grow big and tough! Stretch out your branches! Grow big and tough! Stretch out your branches!”



Her dance continued, her movements so vigorous that her breasts bounced up and down, up and down.

“Oooh!” I gasped, delighted by the sight. No sooner had I expressed my amazement than darkness fell over me. “H-huh?! What’s going on?”

In the background, I heard Luxion say, “You never learn your lesson, do you?”

Angie and Livia, who were standing on either side of me, simultaneously pressed one of their hands over my face, blocking my view.

“H-hey, don’t misunderstand, you two! I’m her employer! Just checking how she’s doing on the job, that’s all!” The excuses I offered were way too transparent. Anyone could tell I wanted to ogle her dance. To my chagrin, neither of my fiancées seemed interested in forgiving me for this.

“We’ll watch her for you. Please rest assured that you have nothing to worry about,” Livia whispered into my ear.

Angie leaned toward my other ear. Her breath tickled against my skin as she spoke, sending chills down my spine. “Yumeria is working hard, I can tell you that. There is no need for you to concern yourself further.”

The way they spoke was gentle and somehow suggestive, sure, but it was also kind of terrifying. I sensed anger hidden deep beneath their dainty words.

“Are you guys mad at me? Did I make you angry?” I asked anxiously.

They didn’t answer. Instead, they dropped their hands in shock. A blinding light flashed around us, and I had to snap my eyes shut. Almost as quickly as it had appeared, the light dissipated.

By the time I peeked my eyes open again, I noticed Sappie looked a lot bigger than it had before. Heck, it wasn’t even a sapling anymore. It had matured into a young tree. Its overall length made it even taller than me.

“It grew this much in such a short span of time?”

It beggared belief, but the lustrous green leaves that rippled in the wind were the same shape as the ones I’d seen on Sappie before I closed my eyes. The rate of its growth left me gaping, which prompted Miss Yumeria

to grin. She wiped away the sweat that had accumulated on her brow while she was dancing.

“This is what it was originally supposed to look like,” she explained.

Noelle rolled her wheelchair closer and stretched out a hand to touch our immature Sacred Tree. The crest on the back of her right hand emitted a faint green glow. I felt the one on the back of my hand heat up too, as the crest manifested itself.

“It’s just as Meria said,” Noelle mumbled. “It’s way stronger than we gave it credit for. Wow, okay... I guess we shouldn’t have worried so much after all.”

No kidding. We were concerned that this barren wasteland wouldn’t provide a sufficient environment for it to grow, but look how quickly we’d been disproven. I sensed a deep inner strength from within our Sacred Tree.

Noelle remained there with her palm flattened against its trunk. She must have started having flashbacks about her life in the Alzer Republic, since tears began rolling down her cheeks. I guessed she was lonely. She was so far away from all she was used to.

“I gotta get stronger too. I swear that, this time, I *will* protect you,” Noelle promised. She was one of the few survivors of the Lespinasse household, a family who had once betrayed the Sacred Tree’s trust. She was now determined to defy that past and protect the Sacred Tree, to lead properly where her parents had failed.

A flustered Miss Yumeria attempted to console Noelle by saying, “This little one is strong *and* kind. I’m sure it understands what you’re trying to tell it, but, um...please don’t cry.”

“Okay, I’ll stop,” Noelle agreed, quickly wiping away her tears. Despite her words, the tears kept coming.

Chapter 9: Colin, the Youngest Son

AROUND THAT SAME TIME, back at the Bartfort estate, Colin awoke early and began restlessly searching the house for a certain someone.

“Hey, where’s Nelly?” he asked when he spotted Finley in the living room.

She pulled a face but answered, “She left with Leon first thing this morning.”

“Seriously? You shoulda woken me up.”

“It’s got nothing to do with me,” Finley said curtly, still half-asleep.

Jenna, the oldest Bartfort girl, was fast asleep in bed; Finley was quieter than normal without her greatest verbal sparring partner. She decided to confront her younger sibling instead, since he would only loiter about the house until Noelle returned.

“Y’know, Colin, you should stop shadowing Miss Noelle all the time.”

“Why?” He looked genuinely shocked.

Finley frowned. “You don’t need to know the reason. Just do what I tell you to do. Got it?” Explaining herself would leave room for argument, so she chose to shut him down right away.

This time it was Colin’s turn to furrow his brows, thoroughly displeased with her forceful attitude. “No, I don’t wanna. Don’t order me around.”

“Don’t argue with me! Stay away from her.”

“Why, though?”

“Like I said, the reason doesn’t matter.”

Finley staunchly refused to explain, no matter how much he asked, but Colin wouldn’t accept it. It was like Finley was mocking him for being the youngest. More importantly, Noelle embodied the ideal older sister to

him: she was kind and seemed to enjoy playing with him. He treasured her far more than either Jenna or Finley nowadays.

“Nope. I’m not gonna do what you say,” he insisted. “I’m gonna play with Nelly again today when she gets back. She’s gotta leave for the capital soon, right? I won’t get to see her for a while after that.”

He was eager to savor whatever remaining time they had left together.

Finley’s expression soured. She looked on the verge of saying something at first but at last breathed a sigh that signified she wouldn’t argue the point further. “Do whatever you want. Don’t come crying to me when it all goes south.”

“I never would! I don’t need your permission.”

With that, Colin started biding his time until Noelle returned.

Only a few days remained until we had to go back to the academy and prepare ourselves for the new school term.

“I wonder if Marie and the others are doing okay. Any reports?” I asked Luxion out of concern, but I received the same stock response as always.

“They presently report nothing amiss. Cleare’s movements have been conspicuous—she has been acting independently—but Marie appears to be actively investigating within the academy. In summary, I have noticed no causes for concern.”

The two were looking into the matter, but they hadn’t found anything of note yet. I should have been relieved to know that Marie was following my orders and doing her best to collect intel. Instead, anxiety bubbled up inside me.

“Marie’s taking things seriously and trying to find some info for me, huh? I figured she’d be more lax about things.”

“Would you have preferred that?” Luxion asked.

“Even I could forgive her for slacking off a bit. My logic was that if I hammered my point home, she’d still take things at a semi-relaxed pace. Things would likely go smoothly then.”

She was more dedicated to this than I’d envisioned, which made me feel bad. Had I intimidated her more than I meant to? Poor Marie surely wanted to get what relaxation she could during spring break, but she was stuck doing this.

“I suspect Marie’s time in the Alzer Republic opened her eyes to the urgency of the matter somewhat,” Luxion said.

“I guess. Funny, since she was against Lelia becoming a Priestess up until the very end.”

Lelia was Noelle’s younger twin. She had reincarnated to this world from Japan exactly as Marie and I had. Lelia’s selfish actions had caused a heap of trouble for us while we were there, but at the eleventh hour she took up the mantle of Priestess in Noelle’s place and remained in the Republic. Not only had she lost the man she loved, but she also committed herself to a thorny, difficult path: She would never be anything more than a symbol for her country. It sounded like an enviable enough role to the ignorant masses, but in reality, serving a symbolic role was far harsher than one might imagine. She was treated with reverence due to her position, but living as a figurehead was grueling. Marie was furious when she heard about Lelia’s choice and was completely unable to comprehend her decision.

In retrospect, there was so much we could have done better. I’d thought countless times, *If only I’d done things differently*. Did Marie have similar regrets?

“So? How about the idiot brigade?”

“Same as ever,” Luxion replied. “I thought they had matured during our time abroad, but were we to rate their progress on a numeric scale... they essentially started in the negatives. Their slight maturation means they are at last approaching zero, but they nevertheless remain in the negatives.”

Oof. Luxion didn’t have the highest opinion of them, that was for sure. I thought they’d grown more bearable since our time in the Republic, but his reaction made it sound like they were back in trouble again.

“What’re they up to now?”

“Julius has begun secretly keeping livestock on the school grounds, and he has even managed to secure a small shed where he is raising chickens.”

“I assume he’s raising them so he can turn them into skewers?” I asked. I was already exasperated with where this was going.

“Indeed. His operation was uncovered, however, and he received a lecture from school staff. They suspended Julius for his transgressions, but he’s determined to see that his livestock shed isn’t destroyed. Incidentally, his work resulted in damages to school grounds, so the academy has requested reparations. They sent the bill to you, Master.”

“What?! Why me?!” I cried.

“Roland purposefully forwarded it to you.”

I gritted my teeth. “The rat and his son are doing their best to give me grief, huh? Fine. Julius has a knuckle sandwich with his name on it.”

“Gracious as ever, Master. Moving on, the next troublemaker is Brad.”

Hold up a second. Am I seriously getting a blow-by-blow report on each one of them? Marie, Kyle, and Cleare have zero to show for their investigation, but there’s a full rundown of all the havoc those worthless dummies have caused? The hell is wrong with this picture?

“Brad set up his own circus tent on school grounds without permission. The academy has forwarded a bill for repair fees.”

“Great, so Brad’s being fined too?”

“Correct. He had no prior experience with setting up such a tent. When it inevitably collapsed, it caused damage to the school. You are considered to be his superior, and therefore the issue is viewed as a lack of oversight on your behalf. As such, you will foot the repair fees.”

“Considering the crap they pulled in the past, I guess this isn’t as bad...”

“Well, the fees incurred by Julius and Brad were relatively low compared to some of the others.”

I stared Luxion down. “Are you telling me that isn’t the last of it?”

“You will be delighted to know that, without exception, every single one of the boys has gotten involved in some form of trouble. Marie, Carla, and Kyle are the only ones to have maintained good behavior.”

“I’m not the least bit ‘delighted.’”

So Greg, Chris, and Jilk had their own clown antics on file as well.

“Lay it on me. What did the other three do?”

“Greg remodeled his room without receiving permission from the school. According to him, he wished to transform his room into a proper training area.”

I wanted to pull my hair out. “Oh, for the love of... Ask for permission first!”

“As you might imagine, he did this remodeling himself and made a great number of mistakes in the process.”

What a surprise. Any time an amateur tried to do something beyond their skill level, they were bound to screw something up. The school rejected his renovation work, as expected, and demanded that the room should be returned to its original state—which required repair fees. The idiot brigade’s allowance wouldn’t cover the full cost, so here I was, stuck with the bill again. I wanted to cry.

“Well? What about Chris?”

“He insisted the baths there were too filthy. Much like the others, he revamped the entire design without any notice or input from the school. You have been billed for all incurred renovation costs.”

This episode differed from the others. Apparently the school was happy he’d taken initiative for such improvements, and they had no intention of returning the affected rooms to their previous state. Unfortunately, this didn’t translate to a willingness to pay for any of it, so the bill was once again pushed into my court as Chris’s superior. Neither Chris nor the others had the financial capabilities to cover these renovations for themselves. What really stumped me was this: Why did it occur to them to start up these construction projects in the first place?

“They just learned the importance of money in the Alzer Republic. You’re telling me they’ve already forgotten it all?!”

“Chris’s excuse was that he would pay for it all eventually,” said Luxion. “He must have assumed they would defer his payments until a later date when he could afford them.”

“Is he stupid?”

“Oh, undoubtedly. As for the final member of their group...”

“Great.” I rolled my eyes. “Here comes the one I least wanted to hear.”

The antics I’d heard about so far were truly moronic, to be sure, but I could grudgingly accept them. What would be impossibly foolish behavior for any other normal person passed as relatively tame stuff for me, a guy who was well acquainted with their idiocy. They had actually matured. Compared with their past behavior, these reports were almost an improvement.

Sadly, the last guy is the one who causes the most problems of all: Jilk.

“He claims to have learned his lesson from all the trouble he caused in the past, buying up artworks as he did.”

My eyes widened. “He’s capable of reflecting on his actions?!” I came dangerously close to being impressed for a moment, but Luxion soon brought me crashing back to reality.

“Which is why,” Luxion continued, “he elected to make his own works of art. He had a kiln set up and prepared to create his own pottery.”

“Hold up. He had *what* set up?”

“A kiln. On school grounds, no less. You will be billed for the cost of setting it up to begin with...as well as the fees for destroying it.”

Aha. If it were that simple for Jilk to be a normal, functioning member of society, my life wouldn’t be half so difficult. Idiots though these boys were, I was impressed by their ability to take the initiative like this. What, were they under the mistaken impression that the school campus was their personal territory? Julius, at least, had enough sense to realize he was in the wrong—otherwise he wouldn’t have tried to hide the chickens he was raising. Brad and his little circus tent might not be too terrible, thinking on it more. And maybe I shouldn’t be too harsh on Greg, either, considering

the comparatively lower cost of the fines he'd incurred. Chris had shown a willingness to pay himself, and that was commendable. But Jilk? Nope. He was dead to me.

"When I get back to the academy, I'm gonna punch Jilk so hard he'll wish he'd never been born," I growled under my breath.

"Oh? You plan to let Julius's actions slide, then?"

"He's not worth pummeling when you compare him to Jilk."

"Master, have you not grown too soft on the idiot brigade?"

"Y-you think? Have I?"

I knew before I left for home that those losers would get up to trouble without me there to keep tabs on them, and I hated being proven right. I wondered if Marie was so dead set on getting information for me because she hoped to make up for the trouble her reverse harem had gotten themselves into. Assuming that I would be livid once I heard what they'd done, she scrambled to do whatever she could to soften the blow. Her actions suddenly made a lot more sense. Yup, that had to be her motivation.

Jeez, those five are totally useless, huh? No, if they were plain useless it'd be an improvement. They're worse than useless. An ever-increasing weight on top of the burden I'm already shouldering.

I sighed. "Just having them around has increased expenses."

"Indeed, they are a plague... Shall I dispose of them?" He asked the question as casually as one might inquire about whether they should take the trash out or not.

"No. Don't do that."

"What a shame." Luxion dropped his gaze to the floor like he was genuinely discouraged. He didn't sound like he was joking; knowing this guy, he would happily exterminate those five if I only gave him the order.

A loud knock rang out from the door.

"Leon," came Angie's voice from the other side, "if you've got time, I'd like you to come with me immediately."

Noelle had her own room set aside for rehab. Luxion had furnished it with everything she would need, including handrails to help her regain mobility. She had finished a session and was back in her wheelchair, taking a break.

“I just about made it in time,” Noelle said with a tremendous grin on her face, pleased at the progress she was making.

Livia stood close beside her, having lent a helping hand throughout the process. She was beaming as well. “All your hard work is finally paying off.”

“Yeah!”

Livia regularly helped with Noelle’s rehab, so seeing her make so much headway with her recovery brought her sincere joy.

Colin was there too, watching all of this play out. A part of him felt lonely, seeing how happily they were celebrating Noelle’s progress. He wanted Noelle’s attention for himself, but he had no chance while Livia was around. Besides, his parents had given him a stern warning not to get in the way of Noelle’s rehab. What he really wanted was the chance to play together with her, just the two of them, but as Noelle was preoccupied, he was waiting for her to finish.

Livia ought to have been concerned about Colin’s presence, but she smiled brightly when she turned her gaze to him. “This must be boring for you, right? Why not go outside and play?”

“I’m fine right here,” he insisted.

He didn’t get why Livia was trying to shoo him out of the room today. Still, he stubbornly refused on account of wanting to stay at Noelle’s side.

Livia’s expression was conflicted. “All right then.” She returned to her conversation with Noelle.

When Colin looked at Noelle, his chest ached more than it ever had. *My heart pounds when I see her*, he realized. He’d sought her out more actively of late, but then when he got her alone, his words deserted him. This had never happened before. Colin was puzzled.

Being a child who didn't know any better, Colin thought at first that he'd contracted some sort of sickness. Soon enough, he discovered there was a pattern: His chest only felt heavy when he was around Noelle or if he thought about her. He felt anxious about these strange symptoms he was experiencing sometimes, but slowly but surely, he was putting it all together.

That has to be it, right? Jen and Fin talked about it before too. There's no other explanation...

His two sisters spoke of a desire to experience a love that made your chest ache. Colin was aware that love could make your heart feel heavy with emotion, and he more or less understood that he experienced this in Noelle's presence. Now that he had reached the truth, he could no longer ignore it—even if he wanted to.

I get it now... My feelings for Nelly are stronger than friendship...

Thinking about it turned his whole face red, heat traveling all the way from his cheeks to his ears.

During his epiphany, Angie returned to the rehab room.

"I brought him," she announced cheerfully. Leon appeared behind her with Luxion in tow.

"You're here too, Colin?" Leon asked. He hadn't expected his younger brother to be here, it seemed, but considering how frequently he'd seen Colin around Noelle lately, he was hardly shocked either.

Colin was delighted to see his beloved older brother. "Yeah," he admitted. "I was worried about Nelly."

"Yeah? That's real considerate of you. I'll give you some spending money later."

"Seriously?!"

"Master, you indulge your younger brother too much." Luxion scolded Leon as he usually did. Colin was accustomed to seeing these skits play out; nothing about it struck him as odd.

"Why are you here?" Colin asked his brother. "You don't normally come here, do you?"

“Noelle’s usually against it,” Leon admitted, glancing in her direction. She was covered in a sheen of sweat from her session.

“I’d feel bad having you help me out when you’re supposed to be relaxing.”

“You don’t need to worry about that.”

“But I do.”

Colin watched the two talk. His hand unconsciously wandered to his chest and clutched tightly at the fabric of his shirt, right above his heart. *Weird*, he thought. *Nelly looks so much happier talking to him than she does with me.*

Colin’s sudden silence made Leon look back in his direction. “There you go. I don’t come here as a rule, but Angie insisted that I make it today.”

At the mention of her name, Angie turned her gaze to Noelle and nodded. Noelle took that as a signal and launched into a demonstration of how her struggle in rehab had borne fruit. Livia held the wheelchair steady so that it didn’t topple over in the process. Slowly but surely, Noelle lifted herself up.

“Noelle?!” Leon cried in surprise.

“This is unexpected,” remarked Luxion.

They hadn’t expected Noelle to be capable of standing on her own so soon, hence their shock. She had sustained such serious injuries that it was a miracle she hadn’t died; she’d only managed to survive thanks to Leon’s treatment. She’d been given all manner of support afterward, all of which had bolstered her recovery. Now she could stand once more. Granted, Noelle was pushing past her limits where she stood in front of Leon. Her legs trembled violently. She kept a smile on her face, even so, to reassure him everything was all right.

“Sappie grew up into a fine young tree, so...I’ve gotta put my best foot forward too.”

The Sacred Tree’s growth and her rehabilitation were entirely unrelated, but seeing how fiercely the tree had clung to life and survived motivated her to meet her own goals.

Noticing how easily Noelle stood, in comparison to her previous attempts, filled Colin with delight. *It's because of all the hard work she's been putting in this whole time. She's amazing.* He'd seen firsthand how much effort she'd put into making this moment possible. He couldn't say he fully understood the pain and suffering she went through, but it looked excruciating enough that he could imagine it. That she'd managed to overcome it all was nothing short of incredible.

Safely on her feet, Noelle moved her legs. She walked toward Leon. Her pace was gradual—one step, and then another. The closer she got to his older brother, the more Colin wanted to cheer her on.

You can do it! Go on, Nelly! You've got thi—

Then suddenly, it hit him.

“Huh...?”

Leon's cheeks grew pinker with every step Noelle took. He held his arms wide open, and she dove for the goal, slipping into his arms with a huge smile on her face. Leon acted embarrassed at first, but the moment he held her in his arms, he whispered, “Look how far you've come, Noelle.”

“Hee hee, I got this far because everyone was rooting for me. Miss Olivia and Angie—even your mother helped me too.”

“I guess I didn't contribute much.”

“Don't disparage yourself. I wouldn't let you help,” Noelle said. “You finally got some free time to rest, so I wanted you to do exactly that.”

Leon shrugged. “I guess. I mean, I get where you're coming from.”

“And anyway...I wanted to surprise you once I could walk again.”

As he watched the two happily embracing, even Colin's immature brain realized what was going on. He stood in place, frozen and dumbstruck. Angie and Livia glanced his way, frowning, and then made their way over to him.

Angie was unsure of how best to handle this, but she squatted down to meet the boy at eye level. “Colin, we've got some sweets ready. Come join us in the other room.”

She was trying to be considerate. She likely had the sweets prepared beforehand in case this happened.

“Angie made some super delicious treats for us to share,” Livia said, coaxing him along. “If you don’t hurry, we’ll eat them all up before you get a single bite!”

The girls had moved in front of him to block Noelle and Leon out of view as they tried to force him to come along with them and leave. Tears welled in Colin’s eyes. Through the gaps between Angie and Livia, he glimpsed Noelle in Leon’s arms. Her cheeks were bright red. He felt two things in the blink of an eye: First, that Noelle was his first love—only now did he truly realize what it was he felt for her. Second was that his heart had broken. He knew that Noelle loved Leon, not him.

Emotions crashed over Colin in a wave. He burst into tears and sped out of the room. His angry scream rang down the hallway as he scurried away: “Leon, you big dummy!”

“W-wait!” Angie called after him in a panic.

Livia’s shout joined her. “Colin, please listen!”

Noelle was just as shocked by his sudden outburst. “Colin, what’s the matter?!”

Colin kept running, but his feet seemed to slow at the sound of Noelle’s voice. It was as if she was beckoning him to turn back. Then, Leon’s voice boomed and startled him out of it.

“Colin! What’d I do?! Tell me!”

He couldn’t face Leon.

He fled. Colin pumped his legs at top speed until he was safely inside his room. He flew past someone in the hallway who scolded him not to run like that, but he was in no mental state to heed such a warning.

The second he slammed the door behind him, Colin dove into his bed and under his blanket. He broke into tearful sobs that refused to calm.

Soon enough, someone came banging on his door. He could tell who was there from the voices he heard: Leon and Luxion, joined by Angie and Livia.

“Colin, come out! Whatever I did wrong, I’ll apologize! Let’s just talk it out, okay? I know we can work it out if we discuss it,” said Leon.

Next, Luxion tried to dissuade him. “I doubt that is a viable option.”

“Could you pick a better time to poke fun at me?!”

“I am not ‘poking fun’ at you. I am merely informing you that the correct choice right now is to give your brother some space.”

“Colin! Please, talk to me. I’m begging you, come out.”

Luxion’s attempts to talk Leon down worked him up all the more. The crack in his voice made it clear how desperate he was; the thought of his younger brother hating him had severely rattled his nerves. As frequently and openly as Leon belittled his sisters, the opposite was true with his brothers. Anyone could see how much he’d opened himself up to both Nicks and Colin, the latter in particular. He was far more indulgent with Colin than he was with Finley. The idea that Colin had come to hate him didn’t sit well with Leon at all.

“Calm down,” Angie said in an effort to placate him. “Leave your brother be for now.”

“I can’t! I don’t want him to hate me.”

Leon sounded like a sulky, obstinate child. Livia gently tried to persuade him, nonetheless. “He needs time. We should wait for Colin to calm down first, okay, Mr. Leon? Give him the opportunity to cool his head.”

“But...but I...”

Leon was impudent and shameless to a fault, but the mere suggestion that Colin was upset with him caused every last drop of his bravado to evaporate.

Finley was passing through the hallway at that exact moment, and seeing Leon groveling in front of Colin’s door ruffled her feathers. “What are you doing?”

“Colin’s locked himself inside. He said I was a dummy. Any idea why he’d say such a thing?”

“Because that’s exactly what you are: a dummy.”

“Excuse me?!”

“Be honest with yourself! You’re way too soft on him. You ought to dote on me more. I’m your little sister.”

“I hate little sisters!”

“What’s your problem?! You wanna go?”

“Don’t assume I’ll go easy on you because you’re my younger sister. I’ve suffered under the thumb of little sisters for far too long, you hear me? Push me further and I’ll happily pay that back tenfold!”

Leon’s proclamation of revenge upon his own younger sister prompted Luxion to comment with extreme exasperation, “You cannot pay someone back unless they do something to you first. Rather than wait for them to pull something, would it not prove wise to find a way to cut that conflict off at the root?”

“Colin,” Leon said, ignoring Luxion altogether, “I’m sorry for whatever I did. I swear, I’ll apologize to your face if you’ll just come out here!”

Colin stayed huddled under his blanket. He sniffled as he rasped out the words, “This isn’t fair at all.”

That was how his first experience with love came to an abrupt end.

“Colin hates me. My life is over.”

The whole family had gathered in the living room. Most of my siblings were here—Nicks, Jenna, and Finley. Luxion was present as well, but Angie and Livia chose not to attend. They knew how depressed I was, but not one of them attempted to console me.

Nicks had a letter in his hands. He sighed as he racked his brain. “Man, imagine how cool it’d be if I knew how to write poetry and stuff. I should’ve studied that more in school. All I’ve got are outdated phrases and clichés—I don’t have a clue what passes for smooth talk nowadays.” The letter was from Miss Dorothea. Ever since we came back from the

Roseblades' territory, she and my brother had taken to exchanging letters like this. Nicks waffled over how to reply every time.

We siblings were seated around a table in the living room. Jenna sat straight across from Nicks, happily munching on some cookies that had been left atop the table.

"You? Write poetry?" she teased. "With your lack of taste? She'd only laugh at you. Better stop while you're ahead."

Nicks sneered at her. "I know very well I don't have taste, but I am your older brother. Show a little more respect, would you?"

"Want me to call you an idiot the same way I do with Leon? I'd be delighted," Jenna quipped, not one to be cowed.

Nicks didn't seem to have the energy to take her to task. "You do call me that occasionally. Anyway...what should I do about my response? Think it's a good idea to send a present along?"

Finley's hand shot up at the mention of gifts. "I want accessories! I start at the academy soon, remember? I want to have dress-up options when I go." She was anxiously anticipating her debut at the school and wanted jewelry that would pair well with her uniform.

Nicks scoffed, "You don't need any."

Jenna nodded in agreement, though for a different reason. "It's better to purchase those things in the capital. Things will go better for you if you check in with the trends there before buying jewelry."

"What? Is that true?" Finley leaned forward in her chair. "Does that mean you aren't up on the current trends, Jen? You were in the capital not so long ago, right?"

"You needn't act like it's weird that I'm out of the loop. Trends change by the year, you know."

"Aww. Then at least tell me some good shops I can visit to buy stuff. Hey, actually, why don't we just visit the capital together?"

"That's a brilliant idea!" Jenna clapped her hands in delight. "Maybe while I'm tagging along for your shopping trip, I can bag myself a handsome man to marry."

“That’s probably asking for too much.”

“It is not! If I can’t find a guy there, then I’ll be stuck out here in the rural countryside for who knows how long. I want to live in the city!”

They were all insufferably noisy.

I’d been sitting in my chair with my knees hugged to my chest, but I slowly lowered my feet to the floor. Rising up from my seat, I slammed both hands on the table. The startling sound of the impact echoed throughout the room. No one could ignore me any longer; all of their gazes turned toward me.

“Would it kill you all listen to me and show a little concern?!” I grumbled. “Colin hates me. He’s holed up in his room as we speak! This is a serious problem. But every last one of you is more concerned with your own stupid—”

I don’t give a crap about your dopey issues! Listen to my problems! That summed up my outburst. It effectively angered every other person in the room.

Nicks’s brow wrinkled as he stared at me. “The issue with Colin aside, I’ve got more important things to worry about than your silly sob story. Like how I’m going to respond to Miss Dorothea’s letter, for instance.”

Jenna sneered with the hostility of an angry cat, hackles raised. “Your little sibling squabble means nothing to me! My whole future is on the line here. I need to go to the capital, find myself a rich, sexy guy, and settle down. I wanna live in the city!”

“R-right,” I blurted back, too intimidated to say anything else. Jenna sounded panicked about her prospects, given that she’d already graduated and had few opportunities to visit the capital.

My mouth snapped shut, and I plopped back into my chair.

Luxion smugly remarked, “You angered the whole room.”

“Annoying jerk. Shut up.”

“Gladly. Nicks, I could assist you in writing your reply if you wish.” He happily indulged my request to shut up, only to drift over to Nicks and chat him up instead.

“You mean it?”

“Certainly. Master caused so much trouble for you. Please, allow me the opportunity to support you. I have a number of possible gift options prepared that you could send to the lady.”

“Thanks. You’re so much more helpful than Leon.”

“Naturally.”

Jenna lifted her hand, sensing an opportunity. “Oh, me next! Introduce me to a guy who’s handsome and loaded.”

“I am afraid that is a bit of a difficult request for me to fulfill. However, if you would like me to share information on a possible candidate, I can do so.”

“You can?! Really? Who? What’s he like?” Jenna demanded eagerly.

“The man’s name is Roland. He is in his forties, admittedly, but I suspect his appearance would satisfy your requirements for handsomeness. He is a good-looking man who appears younger than his age. In addition, he possesses one of the biggest fortunes in the kingdom.”

That rat? Of all people he could bring up?

“Well,” Jenna said, “his age is a bit of a problem, but I can overlook it. What house is he from? Spill.”

“He’s the king of Holfort Kingdom.”

Jenna slapped Luxion without missing a beat. He was a solid lump of metal, so her whole face scrunched from the pain. “You have nerve, recommending His Majesty! There’s no way I could go for him!”

“He has an expansive harem. I deemed you to be a suitable addition if you so desired.”

“No way! Why should I settle for a guy who’s already got a bunch of other—uh, no, I mean... There’s no way a girl like me could be with His Majesty.” Jenna had nearly let slip her disdain for men who kept multiple lovers, but she corrected herself right away. Even she, like many others in the nation, respected Holfort’s king.

“Is that how you feel? What a shame.”

Or maybe it's not exactly respect. More like fear, I thought to myself. Either way, even I didn't want Jenna to end up as part of his collection of playthings. She was a toe rag, make no mistake, but she was family. I'd feel sorry for her.

I watched sadly as my two older siblings fussed over Luxion. Finley noticed the aura of gloom around me and chirped up. "You are seriously worthless, y'know. Some hero of the realm you are."

Seeing me in this sorry state made it difficult for her to fathom the title I'd been given. Honestly? I felt the same way.

"You and me both. If I'm a hero, this country's doomed."

Finley pulled a face. My response had tanked her image of me further. "Pretty pathetic when *you're* saying it."

Angie and Livia were standing in front of Colin's door as the sibling scene unfolded. They had brought snacks and drinks. Each girl gently called out to him through his closed door.

"Colin, you don't have to respond to us, but please listen to what we have to say." Angie stood still and listened after she spoke, but there wasn't a peep from the other side of the door.

If only his parents were here, she thought. Unfortunately, Balcus and Luce were out of the house at the moment. The duty of consoling Colin fell to Angie and Livia.

"I suppose I didn't fill you in on all the details," Angie continued. "You've heard that Noelle is from the Alzer Republic, right?"

Again, there was no reply.

"Leon went there to study abroad. You remember that, don't you? That's where the two of them met. Noelle was in a complicated...well, downright dangerous position there. Leon rescued her."

Angie skipped out on mentioning the Sacred Tree or the Priestess. Colin was a young child, so those explanations could wait for when he was

older.

Her explanation was clumsy—even Angie knew that much—but she did her best to tie it all up. “Anyway, Leon’s the only person who can protect her. I know that must be painful for you to hear, but I hope you’ll respect their circumstances.”

This sort of thing is not my forte.

Poor Colin had fallen in love with his brother’s fiancée only to have his heart broken before he could confess his feelings. Things might have been different had he only fallen for someone else.

Angie pursed her lips. She wasn’t sure what else to say.

“We’re sorry,” Livia said, taking up the reins of the conversation on Angie’s behalf. She spoke in her most tender voice. “We know this must hurt a lot. I just hope you won’t hold it against Mr. Leon or Miss Noelle. We should have told you about everything sooner...but we hesitated because we weren’t sure what to say.”

Prior to that moment in the rehab room, Colin hadn’t realized what his feelings were. What could they have said to him? Luce had advised them to leave things be, saying, “Heartbreak is part of growing up.” Angie and Livia abided by her words and kept silent.

Livia pressed the palm of her hand flat against the door. “There’s a lot more to this that you don’t know about, but...those two can’t be apart. Once you’re a little older, I think you’ll understand all the reasons why. So...”

Before she could continue, a noise came from behind the door. It cracked open after a moment and Colin peeked his head out, his eyes swollen from all the crying.

“...I’m sorry,” said Livia.

Colin invited the two girls in. He perched on the bed, while Angie and Livia sat on either side of him. One put her hand on his shoulder while

the other rested one on his leg, trying to console him. At last, he'd calmed down enough to talk about his feelings.

"I only just realized how I felt about her. I-I didn't know it was love. But then I got so upset...so I ran away." Colin sniffled as he spoke.

"I see, so it made you really sad," Livia said gently, trying to be as empathetic as she could. "But you should still say sorry to Mr. Leon once you've cooled off."

"Yeah. I definitely will."

Relieved, Angie stroked the top of his head. "That's very mature of you, Colin."

The girls offered him the drinks and snacks that they'd brought as they consoled him. He eagerly indulged in their kindness while reflecting on how he felt about Leon and Noelle.

"I want Nelly to be happy," he said.

Angie nodded. "You're a strong boy. To hope for the happiness of someone you care about, even if you know you can't be with them, is a marvelous thing." She hesitated before admitting, "I couldn't manage it."

Colin peered up at her. He noticed her smile was strained, and curiosity got the better of him. "You've had your heart broken before too?"

Livia looked panicked for a moment, but Angie's giggle stopped her from interjecting.

"I did," Angie admitted. "It was a horrible experience. I couldn't bring myself to hope for his happiness. You're way stronger than I was back then."

"I can't believe you went through the same thing... What about you, Livia?"

Livia pulled a face, but Angie gave her a verbal nudge. "Why don't you tell him about it?"

Livia's eyes darted around the room. "I-I think it was, um, an older guy in my neighborhood? I, uh, really looked up to him."

She spoke so vaguely and uncertainly that he gave her a quizzical look. "You looked up to him? So it wasn't love?"

“Oh, um... Well, see...” Livia stuttered and paused so much that Angie assumed she was shy to talk about it.

“I’m curious too. Tell us. There’s no harm in it, is there? It doesn’t matter if you had feelings for someone else before. You’re with Leon now,” Angie said. She blamed Livia’s hesitation on a sense of guilt—that to speak of it would be betraying Leon. That was why Angie assured her that the past didn’t matter.

Livia buried her face in her hands. “No, that’s not it. Actually, I’d never experienced love until I came to the academy. And I only realized it recently. That is, I mean...”

Realization dawned on Angie’s face. Colin wasn’t far behind. “So... Leon was your first love?” he asked.

Livia nodded. “I’m sorry. I know that’s not an appropriate thing to say right now, so I was dancing around the topic.” She could hardly admit to Colin that, unlike in his case, her first love had actually blossomed into a proper relationship.

Angie’s face fell. “S-sorry. That makes sense, I guess. Leon’s the only one you’ve ever had eyes for. B-but that’s fine, right? Some people are like that.”

“I’m so sorry.”

Colin shook his head. “I’m glad to hear your first love went so well!”

Livia’s eyes widened. She was taken aback by how sincerely he cheered for her. “Colin, you are such a sweetheart.”

Both girls had showered him with praise on this visit, but Colin couldn’t understand why. Seeing how happy they both were, he wondered if one day he would experience the same kind of romance they had.

“Will I meet someone I can fall in love with the way you two have with Leon?”

“Definitely,” Angie said. “Until then, be sure to learn all you can, meet lots of people, and make friends.”

Colin narrowed his eyes at her. “You’re using this to get me to study, aren’t you?” Now that he’d experienced heartbreak for himself, he was more guarded than he had been before.

Angie playfully flicked him on the forehead. “Dummy. You won’t grow if you don’t learn! And if you don’t meet all kinds of people, you’ll never find a partner. Or are you content to stay the way you are? Never mature, never meet anyone?”

“...No.” He made a face, but it was clear she had convinced him.

“You’ll definitely meet the perfect girl for you someday,” Livia promised. “Perhaps you already have and you just don’t know it, or maybe the two of you don’t even know each other yet. That’s why it’s important to meet new people and treat them well.”

“Guessing that’s how you guys met Leon?” Colin wondered aloud, only to regret posing the question almost immediately.

Angie’s cheeks flushed a faint red. “I suppose it is. Thinking back on it now, I ought to praise myself for socializing with all sorts of people during my first year. Meeting your older brother was one of the greatest strokes of luck I’ve had in my life so far.”

Livia blushed an even brighter red as she gushed, “Mr. Leon approached me first. He was so dreamy. He saw I was having a rough time and invited me to have tea. He was such a gentleman and so kind. And then...”

The two of them grew so heated that they began to regale Colin with the entire tale of their romance. As Colin listened, he wondered, *Um... I don't really have to listen to all of this, do I?*

Chapter 10: Little Sisters

CONVINCED THAT COLIN hated him, Leon moped about like the world was ending. He plopped himself down on the living room sofa and stared at the ground, his face beset with dark shadows. This whole incident had dealt him a devastating mental blow.

Angie watched from afar, preoccupied with some worry. Livia stood beside her silently and observed Leon. Angie glanced at her friend and asked, “He said he hates little sisters, right? I’m someone’s little sister. Does he hate me too?”

“I-I couldn’t say,” Livia said hesitantly.

Angie had an older brother: Gilbert. That made her a younger sister. She couldn’t help feeling anxious after Leon publicly declared that he hated them.

“I can’t change or fix that,” Angie went on. “But I don’t want him to hate me.”

“It’s all right. I can’t see any possible way Mr. Leon would ever come to hate you.”

“I-I guess you’re right, but he’s pretty staunch about his position on little sisters.”

“He’s overcome his dislike for older ones, thanks to Miss Louise,” Livia reminded Angie. She couldn’t help pulling a face as she mentioned the other woman. She was a sore topic for both of them, since Leon had grown close to her during his time abroad.

Neither Angie nor Livia knew why he’d developed such a hatred for sisters in the first place. Watching him sulk on the couch, they soon learned why.

Jenna and Finley waltzed into the room. As soon as they discovered Leon, they began antagonizing him—this was how they paid him back for the snide remarks he always made.

“Hey, dummy, I hear Colin still hates your guts, huh? As if you never noticed that he was falling for Noelle!” Jenna tut-tutted and shook her head. “Imperceptive as ever.”

“Yeah,” Finley agreed. “Any normal person would notice. Daft beyond belief, that’s you.”

The two girls snickered at him, but Leon was in such a state of shock that he barely even responded. The most he did was wave them off and say, “Go away.”

Jenna folded her arms and smirked down her nose at him. “What happened to that silver tongue you’re always waving around? How’s it feel to be hated by someone you doted on so much? You even managed to piss off Nicks too, didn’t you? Tell me, what’s it like to have both of your brothers hate you? Want your big sister to help cheer you up? Hmm?”

“It feels really crappy. I wouldn’t care if you two hated me, but my brothers? It sucks,” Leon grumbled as he clutched his chest. It were as though the situation had physically broken his heart.

Finley’s smile faltered. “You should show a little emotion for your sisters.”

“Sorry, I’m all sold out when it comes to you two.” Leon was as curt as ever.

Jenna and Finley stared at him, eyebrows twitching as if they were on the verge of losing their tempers and yelling. Angie and Livia were relieved to see that Leon had enough energy to fire back at them, even while he was down in the dumps.

Angie kept her distance as she watched. She commented, “Well, I do get it. Blood relatives would maintain *some* decorum, usually. The kingdom’s policies let daughters from baronial and viscount families essentially have free rein to act however they wanted until recently—I’m sure that didn’t help.”

“The two girls don’t seem like especially bad people to me, though,” Livia said.

Jenna and Finley weren’t rotten all the way through, but there was an inarguable problem with their attitudes. Their treatment of Leon provided

some context for his hatred of sisters, but it didn't provide the whole story.

"Jenna seems a lot harsher on Leon than Finley does, so why is it that Leon hates little sisters the most?" Angie paused and glanced at Livia, who was deep in thought. "Livia?"

Livia jerked her head up, startled. "Y-yes? What is it?"

"Is something troubling you?"

"Um, yes, actually. But it's hard to put it into words."

Angie didn't press the matter further, as Livia looked to be at a loss. Instead, she breathed a small sigh. "Is there no way we can cure his hatred for younger sisters?" She might not have been so concerned about it if she wasn't a little sister herself.

Luxion slowly drifted over to the two girls. Livia flinched and took a small step back to keep her distance. She was as wary of him as ever, although Luxion showed no sign that he was bothered by it. He asked them, "Are you curious as to why Master hates younger sisters so much?"

"Are you sure this'll cure Leon's hatred for little sisters?" Angie crossed her arms, skeptical of this plan.

Luxion confidently reassured her, "My calculations are foolproof."

"Don't lie to me. Leon has thrown your calculations time and time again, hasn't he?"

"Master is an extreme exception. You cannot base my performance on a rare outlier."

Livia listened to the two argue while she analyzed her own appearance. *This is a little embarrassing*, she thought.

The girls had moved to a separate room, where they changed clothes and then proceeded to wait as per Luxion's proposal. Livia felt a bit uneasy about his plan, but her curiosity won out over her nerves, so she decided to go along with it.

Little sister, hm... I do remember Miss Marie calling Mr. Leon her "Big Bro" before. I didn't put too much thought into it at the time, but she also said something about this being her "second chance in life." Did she mean her second chance to succeed in this life? Or a second lifetime? I don't understand what she meant. Why did she call Mr. Leon "Big Bro," anyway?

Livia overheard all of this during the final showdown against the Principality of Fanoss. She had chased after Marie who had offered to "return everything" to Livia. The whole situation was so confusing that Livia hadn't spent much time mulling it all over. Only as she reflected on it now did she recognize so many dubious discrepancies.

The two of them butted heads repeatedly before then, but at about that time Mr. Leon started being more lax around her. He made it clear that he despised her, yet at the same time, he never moved to drive her away. His attitude... It was almost like they were brother and sister. I wonder if there's something to all of that?

Leon swore his contempt for Marie but treated her practically the same way he did Finley. Unfortunately, it would be hard for Livia to confront him and ask these questions directly. Leon was too secretive and cagey. He'd even kept Luxion's true form a secret from them until recently. Livia didn't want to bother posing the question knowing that; she feared it would burden him.

I do wish he'd be more open with me about things, but right now, what I want most is for him to get some much-needed rest.

The two girls were motivated to dress up in costumes for another reason besides curing Leon's unusually strong distaste for little sisters. Luxion had assured them this would cheer Leon up. Livia donned the outfit Luxion selected because she wanted to brighten Leon's day, especially after how much he'd exerted himself for so long.

Livia and Angie were joined by Cordelia, who had helped them change. Now that they had finished, she moved toward the door. "I will fetch the marquess."

"P-please do, Cordelia," Angie said stiffly.

“Yes, my lady.” A strange light shone from the depths of Cordelia’s eyes as she looked at her mistress, who was as embarrassed as Livia about this whole ordeal. Livia wondered what was going through Cordelia’s head.

Once Cordelia disappeared down the hallway, Angie moved in front of the mirror to check herself over. She wore a maid outfit that came complete with a miniskirt. Luxion had given them animal-eared headbands to wear and had even prepared tails to attach to their lower backs. Angie studied her reflection and saw a cat-eared maid staring back.

“You’re *sure* this will work? I’ll cry if this freaks Leon out!”

Livia nodded. “I’m on the verge of tears already.”

The two girls had dressed in maid outfits before during the school festival, but they hadn’t worn accessories to resemble demi-humans back then. Livia wore floppy dog ears in contrast to Angie’s cat ears.

Why were they dressed in such silly attire? Well, it was all part of Luxion’s master plan.

“Success is guaranteed,” Luxion said. “Master should be delighted when he sees you. When you see him, be sure to call him ‘Big Bro,’ as I guarantee that will immediately vanquish his hatred for younger sisters.”

Livia tugged on the hem of her miniskirt, worried it was too short. “He’ll be happy about this? He saw us in maid uniforms before at the school festival... He seemed pleased enough about our outfits, but his reaction wasn’t that strong.”

Angie shared her own concerns. “And you think he’ll like these animal ears and tails? C-can we truly expect him to get over his hatred of little sisters, merely by calling him ‘Big Bro’? It could have the opposite effect and cause him to avoid us...don’t you think?” The typically self-assured Angie was terrified of earning Leon’s disdain.

She’s so adorable, Livia thought, admiring Angie’s vulnerable side. There was a stark difference between her present nervous behavior and her usual confidence. Livia was grateful for the opportunity to glimpse another side of her friend.

Luxion shook his lens from side to side, the same way he did when expressing exasperation with Leon. “The two of you don’t understand at all.

Master is simple-minded. He hated older sisters until meeting with Louise changed his mind. The two of you doting on him in such a manner will have a similar effect.”

Livia clasped her hands together. “I’m not sure if I like that either.”

Luxion’s assessment meant that Leon was fickle and impressionable enough to be pleased with any girl who doted on him. That encouraged a whole new type of anxiety.

The girls fretted over whether this would go well or not until Luxion interrupted. “Master has arrived. I ask that you please follow the instructions I gave you.” Missive spoken, he suddenly disappeared from view.

The girls had come this far. All they needed was to pluck up the courage to see it through.

“Nothing ventured, nothing gained,” Angie said more to herself than Livia. “I’m ready.”

Angie’s determination urged Livia to rally herself. “You’re right. We can’t start acting embarrassed about this now. I’ll fuss over him as best as I can! B-but the whole ‘Big Bro’ thing is a little embarrassing.”

“I normally call Gilbert ‘elder brother’ as a sign of respect. Should I try that instead?” Angie wondered aloud.

A scant few seconds remained before the moment of truth, and yet they still waffled over the details. A knock on the door put an end to that.

“You girls in there?” Leon asked. He sounded somewhat cavalier in spite of his dour mood.

The girls welcomed him in by way of Angie’s indirect invitation and Livia’s polite greeting:

“It’s open.”

“You may enter.”

The door handle rattled, then the door itself swung open—Livia and Angie struck adorable poses. They were told to act like animals, so they curled their hands like paws, raised them, and pretended they were about to pounce.

Livia spoke first. “We’ve been waiting for you, Big Bro. Woof woof!” Unable to think of any better way to refer to him, Livia went with Luxion’s original suggestion. She sidled up to Leon, cheeks burning with embarrassment, and spoke as suggestively as she could into his ear.

Th-this is so embarrassing! But it’s a small price to pay if it helps Mr. Leon cheer up.

“...Huh?” Leon squeaked out, frozen solid with surprise.

Angie threw herself at him next. She clung to Leon as she said, “I’ve caught you meow, Elder Brother. We’ll act up if you don’t play with us.” Dying as she likely was of embarrassment, Angie tacked on a “meow” of her own to sound more catlike.

Leon didn’t react at all. Both girls were instantly convinced this whole scheme was a failure.

Lux, you big liar! Livia cried inwardly.

Leon sank to his knees.

“Big Bro!”

“Elder Brother!”

The two of them swooped in to wrap their arms around him and stop him from collapsing completely. Then they noticed tears streaming down his cheeks. They traded dumbstruck glances.

Leon sobbed happy tears. His voice cracked as he blurted, “I finally get it. Little sisters aren’t cute at all, but girls who *act* like little sisters are peak adorable.” He continued crying as he bared his soul. “I always wanted cute sisters like you two!”

He had drawn a comparison between his fiancées and the actual little sisters he knew. Having both girls fawn over him had prompted an instant shift in his values.

A confused Angie asked, “So...you don’t hate little sisters anymore?”

“Nope, I definitely hate them. But my mental dictionary has been modified to include a note that non-biological sisters are cute.”

That was a shift, at least. He'd said before that he hated the very concept of little sisters, biological or otherwise. The change had happened as seamlessly and quickly as Luxion promised it would.

Livia wasn't entirely satisfied with this whole thing, but she swallowed her complaints back; Leon looked far too elated for her to take issue. "I'm just glad we made you happy."

"Thank you both. Those outfits look amazing on you." His face lit up as he took their hands in his and squeezed. That was perfect evidence of their plan's effectiveness.

Angie's expression relaxed. "As long as you enjoyed it, that's all that matters."

"But while we're on the topic... Luxion, you're here, aren't you?"

The peaceful mood in the room abruptly came to an end. Luxion was nearby, cloaking himself, and Leon had picked up on it. His whole demeanor shifted the moment he called his robot companion's name.

When Luxion revealed himself, Leon got to his feet.

"You were delighted, as I suspected. I would, however, advise you to exercise more caution with respect to your reactions henceforth. They were both nervous about how you would receive this."

Leon glowered at him. "That's all you have to say for yourself? What were you thinking, putting them up to this?"

"They consulted me about how to cure your hatred for little sisters, so I lent them my expertise. I may have included some advice regarding your sexual proclivities, admittedly."

"So you told them I enjoy this kinda dress-up stuff? Fed them a pack of lies?"

"I was attempting to imitate Cleare, but it seems this joking business is rather difficult. I didn't honestly believe the girls would take me seriously. But since they did, I will be sure to take pictures. You'll want several for yourself, I'm sure?"

"Three each. I gotta have some extra copies."

All emotion gradually drained from Livia's and Angie's faces as they listened to their back-and-forth.

Cordelia, who had escorted Leon here, popped her head in from the hallway and flagged down Luxion. "I desire three copies each for myself—no, actually, I'll need thirty of the young miss to use as gifts. How much will it cost?"

"Payment is not required."

"Ah, but I'd feel guilty if I received them for free."

Angie whipped around at the part about her picture being used as a gift. She eyed her maid for only a moment before fixing Luxion with an accusatory glare.

"You," she growled.

Luxion floated slowly to the doorway as he faced them. "You both cheered Master up. I consider my plan a success." At the first chance he got, he accelerated away.

Both girls forgot all about their embarrassing outfits as they dashed after him, determined to catch up.

"Lux!" Livia bellowed.

Angie joined her, shouting, "Luxion, we've got a bone to pick with you!"

It was quite a sight as two girls dressed in maid outfits scurried over the Bartfort estate.

"Oh, that's a good photo there."

"The young miss looks most adorable in this one, it's true. I must be sure to send a copy to the duke and Lord Gilbert."

A few days after that fiasco, Miss Cordelia and I gathered together to split Luxion's photographs. Miss Cordelia was desperate to get her hands on Angie's copies.

“This one is splendid as well. Her gestures are so perfect. Goodness, in this one you can tell she’s let her guard down! I must insist on acquiring all copies of these. They are far too provocative for any gentleman to look at.”

I stared at her. “Aren’t you a little *too* fond of Angie?”

“Of course I’m fond! I have been at her side for a very long time. I was assigned to her care the moment I took up a post at the duke’s house. She was absolutely adorable as a young child.” As she gushed about Angie and her cuteness, her typical cold aura thawed. She eagerly shared her memories of Angie’s younger years, her usual aloofness and respectable, business-like distance forgotten.

I grabbed one of the pictures and examined it. It showed Livia and Angie posing together adorably.



“They’re so cute,” I murmured.

I stuffed the photo in my pocket.

Miss Cordelia stared me down. “Marquess Bartfort, were you listening?”

“Uh, yes!”

“Very well. Then I will share with you one of my favorite stories about the young miss. She was elated to be engaged, though her partner was an incompetent buffoon.”

I hardly blamed her for disparaging Julius. Had someone else overheard such language, they would consider it a show of great disrespect toward the crown—a punishable crime—but thankfully, Julius’s reputation was already in the gutter. He’d committed his own grave offenses toward Angie, to boot. I had no intention of scolding Miss Cordelia for her language.

Our conversation continued, with Miss Cordelia sharing story after story well into the evening.

Chapter 11:

A Bond More Unbreakable than Any Chain

NICK'S ANXIETY flew into overdrive from the moment the sun rose that morning. He paced around the estate before returning to his room, only to wander back outside again. Too restless to settle down, he kept walking and walking.

I shook my head at the pitiful state he was in. "Cool it already. Miss Dorothea's coming to spend some time here, that's all."

Dressed in his best clothes and with perfectly styled hair, it was all too obvious that Nicks had been waiting with bated breath for her to visit.

"I-I'm perfectly calm!"

"Yeah? How do you figure?"

Nicks scowled. Rather than replying, he focused on taking deep breaths in a vain attempt to soothe his nerves. It was strange, thinking of how difficult he'd found Miss Dorothea to be around such a short time ago.

"My older brother is in a seriously tragic state," I said, shrugging and shaking my head.

Luxion wouldn't stand for that, and not just because he lacked legs. He snidely remarked, "If your brother is in a 'sad state,' what does that make you? Keep in mind that you are significantly more pathetic than he is."

"Moron. Once I knew I couldn't escape, I had the good sense to resign myself, remember? My brother's practically tied the knot and yet look at how much he's fidgeting and fussing about it."

"I must communicate to you, Master, that you have completely misinterpreted the situation."

I quirked a brow. "How so? Just yesterday he was moaning and groaning about whether he was really good enough for her."

"I am referring to your fictitious claim that you had the good sense to resign yourself once you knew you couldn't escape. You were a restless,

fidgiting mess up until the very last second yourself, may I remind you. You have zero right to make light of your older brother.”

“Oh yeah?” I scrunched up my face and sulked. Then I spotted Colin at the corner of the room, staring at me. “Colin!”

“Eep!”

The second I saw him, I panicked and leaped to my feet, but all that did was startle him into running away. I reached after him but didn’t give chase. *No chance to talk with him today, either.* The cloud of dark emotion I’d briefly dispelled returned with a vengeance.

“If only he’d talk to me. Luxion, do something about this,” I demanded.

“No. The matter is largely settled.”

“What do you mean ‘no’?! That was an order!”

“There is nothing for me to do,” he insisted. “The conflict is already on its way to resolution.”

“You’re not pulling my leg, are you?” I eyed him suspiciously.

Noise erupted from the entrance of our house. Miss Dorothea and her entourage had arrived.

Colin had been trying to find an opportunity to apologize to his older brother since his first heartbreak, but the timing never seemed quite right. When he tried again to seek out his brother to do the deed, he spotted Leon talking to Noelle who was sitting in her wheelchair once more.

“Leon, did you talk to Colin yet?” she asked.

“Nah, no luck.”

“Oh, all right. I’d like to talk to him too, but he’s been avoiding me lately.”

His heart ached, seeing how downcast his two favorite people looked. Yet he also struggled to accept how cozy they were together, somehow.

Colin was a young boy—asking him to forget his feelings and cut his losses was a tall order. He hadn't spoken to Leon yet for that reason.

At the very least, I want to apologize to him when Nelly's not around, he thought. But it was because he'd spent the whole time chickening out and running that he'd missed his opportunity to do so thus far.

Colin turned to leave, hoping to find a quiet place to sort out his emotions, but when he peeked through the outside window, he spotted his parents dragging a boat out of the storage. And not just any boat! This one hovered in the air, packed full of food and drinks. Balcus and Luce were dressed in finer clothing than usual. Curious what they were up to, Colin headed outside.

Colin arrived to find his parents about to climb into the boat together. Balcus was lending Luce a hand, helping her inside the vessel.

"Where are you going? We have a guest today," Colin said. It was odd to him that his parents were leaving the estate when they knew an important guest would be coming.

Balcus and Luce merely traded looks before smiling at him.

"It'll be fine," Balcus said. "Nicks will handle things. The two of us are going on a little outing. Behave yourself while we're gone and try not to get in Nicks's way."

Luce added, "Exactly. Whatever you do, don't disrupt your brother. You're free to play with anyone else, though."

Colin still couldn't tell what was going on, but he nodded nonetheless. "Okay then. Where are you two headed?"

Balcus seemed a bit embarrassed. He scratched his cheek nervously. "Uh, you know. I figured I'd take your mother on a tour of our region. It's a tiny boat, so we won't go too far away."

The vessel they were using was rather small, in fact. It made sense not to travel any long distance with it. Considering how much they had fancied themselves up for the occasion, though, Colin couldn't help but puzzle over what was really going on.

Then, it hit him.

"Oh. Is this a date?"

Luce beamed in spite of herself. “Oh dear, our little boy sure has matured.”

Balcus didn’t even try to respond. Instead, he scratched his head and looked away awkwardly.

“Your father and I made up, so we’re going out together,” Luce answered for him. “Now that you know, be good and stay here at the estate today.”

“Is it a good time for you guys to be leaving...?”

Dorothea Roseblade was coming to visit. Was it proper for his parents to be absent?

“I’m sure it’ll be easier on Nicks if we’re not underfoot,” Balcus answered. “Colin, I mean it. Don’t get in Nicks’s way. But feel free to get in Leon’s as much as you want. He deserves some trouble.”

“Honestly, I can never tell if that boy is amazing or terrible.” Luce shook her head. Neither parent knew what to make of their middle son.

Seeing that things had improved between the two came as a relief. *They finally made up!* Things were tense between them lately, and even a child of Colin’s age had noticed and worried about it. It was reassuring to see them back the way they were before.

“All right. I’ll go to my room and read, then,” Colin said.

Balcus reached over and ruffled his hair. “You’re a good kid.”

Colin watched his parents set off, feeling envious. They were such a loving couple. Not long ago, his father’s legal wife had been a woman named Zola. Colin had no good memories of her to speak of, and she rarely ever showed up at the estate. When she did, all she did was complain. He knew her then as his father’s wife, but he never considered her part of the family.

It was only after his parents disappeared from view that Colin was hit with a certain realization.

“Wait... Dad was married to Mom and Zola, but for a while now it’s only been him and Mom.”

Zola had disappeared at some point, and no one in the house ever spoke her name again. As a child, he figured it was something taboo for him to ask about...but curiously, Balcus never attempted to marry any other woman. Colin found something strange about that.

“Weird...”

Colin returned to their family estate to find Jenna and Finley walking down the hallway. Neither girl seemed to have noticed him. In fact, they stopped in the middle of the corridor to talk. Colin knew even if he called out to them, they'd likely spurn him or worse, tease him. He opted to hide and wait for them to leave.

His sisters began grumbling to one another in no time.

“Ugh, this is awful! Why are well-to-do ladies showing up here, in a rural countryside house like ours?” Jenna scowled. She couldn't fathom why anyone would want to visit this place. The ladies she referred to were, of course, Angie and the others. Jenna was so put out by their presence that it drove her to complain.

Finley seemed equally confused, though far less bothered. “It's kinda weird, yeah, but what's the problem? They bring us gifts and stuff.”

Colin could agree with Finley's optimistic outlook for once. Since Angie and the others began staying here, their meals had become more extravagant. Duke Redgrave sent money to pay for the expenses of his daughter's stay, in addition to luxurious gifts, among which were rare treats that Colin enjoyed. A simple pattern had been established in his mind: If Angie was here, he got more sweets. That was as far as his thoughts extended. He'd heard she was a lady from a well-to-do family, but he didn't comprehend the level of their prestige. All he knew was that his parents acted deeply subservient toward her family, which indicated the Redgraves held a much higher position.

Jenna sighed, one hand pressed to her forehead. “Look, normally, you'd never get near a girl like that without joining her posse. It was

shocking enough for Leon to land a girl like that, but who'd dream Nicks would pull the same thing and bring in an earl's daughter? No one with common sense!"

"So? Our dad's a baron." Finley saw no reason for them to feel intimidated; they were aristocrats themselves.

Annoyed, Jenna flicked her younger sister on the forehead.
"Dummy!"

"Ouch!"

"Here in the kingdom, the distance between a baron and earl might as well be the same as between the ground and the clouds high above. You saw the Roseblades' castle, didn't you? *That* is what true nobility looks like. We're little better than a knight family."

Finley frowned. "I mean, I guess the earl's home was pretty impressive."

Jenna sighed and said, "Once you enter the academy, you'll learn... whether you like it or not. Real noble ladies are on a different level than us."

"Is it that big of a difference?"

"Every piece of clothing they wear is personally tailored to their sizes. They have their own craftsmen and even their own airships. All the maids who serve them are from knight families."

"Wow. Being rich sure is incredible." Impressed by this information as Finley was, she hadn't digested what it meant.

Colin overheard their whole conversation. He agreed with Finley—it all sounded incredible, but he didn't appreciate the underlying meaning.

Finley's inability to comprehend her warning annoyed Jenna, but she didn't bother to scold her further. Perhaps she remembered how clueless she had been before her own inauguration. "You don't get it right now, but I'm telling you, once you get to the capital it's inescapable. And when you get it, you'll realize how uncanny this whole situation is."

"I mean, I am puzzled by it," Finley admitted. "Our brothers are pretty lackluster, but they still get with girls from high-ranking houses."

Leon's betrothed to a duke's daughter, and Nicks is with an earl's daughter. It beggars belief."

Finley had grown up with the boys since childhood, so they didn't seem the least bit remarkable to her. Yet somehow, for all their lack of attractive qualities, both brothers had won the hearts of gorgeous, high-ranking women? She could agree with Jenna there: It made no sense.

Jenna crossed her arms and frowned down at her feet. "In Nicks's case, it's especially troubling. He's gonna inherit Dad's title and territory, so whoever becomes his wife will eventually live here. Lady Angelica will leave eventually, so I can put up with her being around, but imagining how Lady Dorothea will be the woman of the house someday..." Jenna shuddered, her face growing deathly pale. She looked genuinely terrified.

Colin peeked out from the pillar he was hiding behind. He was overcome with fear as well. Things were pretty bad, he reasoned, if his tyrannical older sister felt *this* intimidated. *She called her Lady Dorothea... Jen never refers to anyone that politely. Jen is scary, but she's shaking like this...so Miss Dorothea must be even more scary, right?*

"I know what you mean! When I asked Leon to give me some spending money before, Angie gave me this cruel look. Sent a chill down my spine, for real!" Finley laughed about it nonchalantly.

Colin's sisters often crossed the line when it came to Leon, hence Angie and Livia's disapproval. Livia was no threat because she wasn't part of the aristocracy, but Angie was a different matter. Jenna was older, but the aristocratic hierarchy demanded she show deference. It was far stricter than the caste system observed at the school, and so Jenna couldn't defy Angie. They had a little more leeway when dealing with men, but the rules were more rigid among women.

Jenna was livid with Leon for forcing this whole situation upon them. "It was bad enough dragging a duke's daughter into the mix. Now he's pulled in some princess from another country! What's wrong with the men in this household? Thanks to them, I can't even feel comfortable in my own house. I'm too busy feeling inferior to everyone else here."

"Yeah," Finley agreed with a sharp nod. "Leon's terrible enough as it is, but then he's got the nerve to surround himself with multiple women. Does it even make any sense for him to take three women as his future

wives? What do they even see in him? None of them have any taste in men, I swear.”

“Ugh, you said it. I’d never let that fly. Even if Leon was rich, I’d never want to be with him.”

Hearing how his sisters disparaged Leon only encouraged the suspicion budding in Colin’s mind to grow bigger and bigger.

Is it weird for him to have three wives?

Colin ventured to the inner courtyard next. He had so much on his mind to mull over. He sat down on the edge of one of the flower planters and jiggled his leg up and down.

A short moment later, a man and a woman slipped out from the estate into the courtyard where he sat. He recognized his older brother, Nicks, and their family’s guest, Dorothea; neither one seemed to notice Colin. Nicks looked nervous. His lips twitched like he had some important topic to discuss.

Colin remembered then how emphatically his parents had warned him not to get in Nicks’s way. *I’d better hide*. Careful not to make a sound, he lifted himself up and found a nearby hiding spot to slip into.

“Miss Dorothea!” Nicks exclaimed without warning.

“Y-yes!” Dorothea’s voice hitched as she replied, her nerves getting the better of her. Blood pooled in her cheeks the same way it did in Nicks’s.

“I-I would like...for the two of us to live here together...if possible.” Nicks expressed his feelings as best as he could, even though he had to stutter through his words.

A short stretch of silence lay between them before Dorothea announced her too-loud reply, “I-I want to live here too!”

They both blushed fiercely and remained rooted in place for some time. It was humorous to them, apparently, because they burst into peals of laughter.

Colin had unwittingly witnessed Nicks's best attempt to confess his feelings for Dorothea. He watched, careful not to interrupt, and realized that while he was cheering Nicks on, he also felt tremendously jealous.

Congrats, he thought.

"I'm in love with you, Lord Nicks," Dorothea said.

"I-I feel the same."

"Yes, I sense you do, but I think my feelings are stronger still. Should the two of us somehow reincarnate into different bodies and circumstances, I would find you and fall in love all over again. In each time to come, I would marry you. I won't ever let anyone else have you."

Dorothea's impassioned profession of love had Nicks fidgeting and glancing away.

"Ha ha, it really warms my heart to hear you say that. But, um, you know..." His voice trailed off as he groped for the right words.

Dorothea tilted her head.

As if resigned, Nicks finally sputtered, "The collar thing. As long as you promise not to do it in front of others, I don't mind if we do it when it's just the two of us." Instead of denying her fetish completely, he'd made conditions to compromise and indulge it.

Dorothea, however, shook her head. "No, I have no interest in that anymore."

"Pardon?"

"Allow me to rephrase. Collars and chains have no purpose in our relationship."

Nicks's expression relaxed. "Oh, okay then! Sorry. I don't mean to sound like I'm glad you're over it, just...I always hoped we could find happiness even without them."

"Of course. The two of us will be together forever and ever. I will never let you go, no matter what."

"Uh, r-right." Nicks seemed a little concerned at her phrasing but didn't linger on it. The pair's faces drew closer, eliminating the space

between them. Colin realized they were about to kiss. His cheeks burned as he quietly crawled away from the screen to give them their privacy.

Hmm, he thought to himself. Is this kinda relationship the norm then? It seems...a little scary to me.

Before dinner that night, Colin paid a visit to Nicks's bedroom. Nicks was considerably exhausted, but successfully expressing his feelings to Dorothea had put him in good spirits. He welcomed his younger brother's visit with delight. "Hey, Colin! What's the matter? If you're hoping I'll help you apologize to Leon—"

"No, that's not it. I want to ask you something."

"Yeah? What is it?"

"Um, so...you're gonna marry Dot, right?" Colin asked. He gave her a nickname, just as he had nicknamed the other older sister figures in his life.

"Uh, yeah. I guess I am," Nicks answered. Colin's blunt question made him look flustered but happy. "I'm not entirely sure I measure up enough for her. Funny, thinking back on how I laughed off Leon's marriage to Miss Angelica. I thought it had nothing to do with me."

"Okay. So...are you going to marry someone else after her then?"

Nicks's brows knitted for a second. His expression softened when he reminded himself that a child was posing the question. He could easily conjecture why Colin might ask it. "Let me guess... You're asking me this because you saw Dad married to two women and now Leon's doing the same, right?"

"Yeah. Dad was married to...Lady Zola before." Colin hesitated to bring up her name.

Nicks nodded. "Zola and her kids weren't part of our family. Dad married her to keep up his image, but we're his only real family. He could never have managed all the work around the region by himself, anyhow."

There had been a long period in Holfort Kingdom's history where a small percentage of noble women held immense power. The men found their positions much more precarious by comparison, although they were allowed to keep their own harems and mistresses. This was permitted primarily because men were prescribed so much work that contributions from their partners were expected. This applied to both the aristocrats, who received their work directly from the palace, and those who held their own territory. They couldn't work efficiently unless they delegated work, and it was much safer to leave household matters to family rather than a servant. This led to a habit of men maintaining relationships outside of their legal, official marriage. Many houses who abstained from such relationships were also unable to fulfill their obligations and fell into ruin.

All of those reasons were part of why Balcus had brought Luce into his household, essentially as a concubine. He took no other women after her, though, and in his mind she was his sole legitimate wife.

"Dad couldn't defy social obligation and expectation, so he had to marry Zola. If he'd had the option back then, I think Mom would've been the only woman he ever married."

"What about you?"

"The future is unpredictable so I can't say for certain. Right now, I can't so much as think about any other girl."

His questions were answered. Colin wondered one last query to himself: *Does that mean Leon is weird for having three brides-to-be?*

Colin hadn't given the concept of marriage much thought before, but after experiencing his first love and having his heart broken, his mind wandered. The first thing that popped into his head was how many girls Leon had as fiancées. Why did he have three of them while others did not?

"Leon, um, I'm sorry about before." Colin dropped his head into a low bow before me. It was after dinner, and he'd arrived to apologize.

Hot tears welled in the corners of my eyes. I never imagined my little brother could have fallen for Noelle.

“It’s my fault too. I should have explained things to you right away!”

“No, it’s fine. It was my fault.”

I’d still thought of him as a little kid until recently, but he’d matured—not only physically, but mentally as well. I was over the moon to see his progress. Unfortunately Luxion, in typical fashion, had to chime in and rain on my parade.

“Your younger brother has matured mentally, it seems. You could stand to learn from his example, Master. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“I’d argue with you about it, but I’ll drop it since Colin’s here. For your information, I *have* been reflecting on my own mistakes this time around.”

Colin’s apology came as a relief. To think we could go back to being as close-knit as we were before was a huge weight off my shoulders.

“I’m glad the two of you made up,” Noelle said with a smile. She was surely as pleased as Colin and me, with how she’d worried over our spat.

Angie and Livia were also present to watch us. Each girl’s expression was much more relaxed.

“It took a bit, but things are finally back to normal,” said Angie.

Livia nodded. “Mr. Leon must be relieved as well. Thank goodness we solved so many problems before the start of the new term!”

The issue between Colin and me had taken its toll on the girls as well.

“We finally got some time off, and the three of you didn’t even get to enjoy it. Sorry,” I said.

Ending spring break this way, after everything before it, made me feel terribly guilty. Especially since Angie and Livia had been worried sick about me the whole time. I tried to reassure them it was all a misunderstanding, that I was fine, but they refused to believe me. That part bugged me a little, to be honest. I did get plenty of chance to rest my body, though, so I wanted to offer them my gratitude.

Angie's lips curled into a gentle smile. "Nothing for you to worry about. If this helped get your mind off things, then...I'm glad."

"Yes, please don't worry. We had plenty of fun," Livia said. She pressed a hand to her chest as if emphasizing that she spoke from the heart. "We got to spend quality time with you for the first time in a long while."

Noelle threw her arms wide open in an emphatic display of how much she enjoyed her spring break. "My rehab is going great, and your family made me feel right at home. I'm the one who feels guilty! You guys have done so much for me."

They were all trying to comfort me in their own way.

"Thank you all." I felt Colin tugging on my clothes. "What's wrong?" I glanced down to find him peering up at me with a very serious expression.

"Leon," he said.

"Yeah?"

"I think you'd better take really good care of these three." He shook his head. "No, you've gotta make them happy, no matter what."

I hesitated to respond, if only because his phrasing—"no matter what"—was heavy with responsibility. But I was in no position to say no. I nodded. "R-right. I plan on it."

But I knew, deep down, that the future was unpredictable. There were no guarantees. I couldn't promise him I would make them happy, but I could convey my intentions to do so. *Though that probably makes me sound unreliable...*

"Have a bit more confidence!" Colin said. "Nicks already told Dot how he feels. He even said that he wouldn't look at any other girls."

I never imagined I would hear Colin, of all people, bring up what Nicks said when he professed his love to Miss Dorothea. More importantly...

"You're kidding me! That big wuss actually told her he loves her?!"

"He did! And Dot even said no matter how many times they were reborn into different lives, she'd still find him and marry him again!"

"Err, that's a little heavy... Isn't it?"

Scratch that, it's seriously heavy. We're talking being-crushed-by-a-freight-train heavy! Her sentiments hit especially hard for me, who literally had been reborn into a new life. Her words sounded like a promise to hunt him down to the ends of the earth, even after death. Didn't Nicks find any part of that strange?

"So, uh, while we're on the topic... How'd Nicks take Miss Dorothea's little declaration? Was he turned off? Or terrified?" I had to ask—had to know.

Colin pulled a face at me, like he didn't get why I'd bother asking such a question. "He was happy about it! Why wouldn't he be? He got his feelings across, and she responded to them."

"No way!" My jaw dropped.

Had a girl said something like that to me, I'd be plotting the quickest way to bail in seconds. A girl chasing after me, even after our lives were over? Talk about terrifying! I didn't sense the tiniest scrap of romance in such a scenario, but the girls in the room felt differently.

Angie commented, "Dorothea's a bold one, talking about finding him no matter how many lifetimes they're reborn into. I hope I'm fortunate enough to meet all of you again in my lives to come."

"Reuniting with someone in different lifetimes really seems like fate, doesn't it?" Livia sighed dreamily. "I'll definitely seek all of you out in my next life."

"You Holfortians say some incredible things. But..." Noelle's voice trailed off for a moment before she continued, "I kinda like it."

This can't be happening, can it? Why are they all praising what Miss Dorothea said? It made a chill run down my spine. Having Marie chase me down after death and find me in this lifetime was bad enough. Fortunately, in our case, it wasn't a romantic entanglement. She was like the resident jester in my story. *Maybe that makes it okay?*

Colin continued while I was lost in thought. "Leon, are you listening? I'm telling you to pull yourself together. Follow Nicks's example."

"R-right."

Who would've thought the day would come when my little brother would be the one lecturing me?

Luxion was evidently amused by all of this. He teased, "Your younger brother's growth is heartening indeed. What do the rest of those present think?"

Angie brought her hand, curled into a loose fist, near her lips as she mumbled, "You know, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't envious of Dorothea."

"I never expected Mr. Nicks to admit his feelings so openly," Livia said, pressing her hand to her forehead. "It *does* seem really nice."

Noelle shot me a worried glance. "Pretty obvious by now that the biggest coward in this family when it comes to love is you, Leon."

Colin had experienced heartbreak, yes, but he'd also apologized. Nicks came right out and confessed his feelings without much prompting. Compared to the two of them, I was criminally lacking in the romance department. I was desperate to find a single thing I'd done better than any of them...and then it hit me.

"I've got more fiancées than anyone else in the family!"

Luxion and the three girls shook their heads, thoroughly disgusted. They all got this was just one of my many usual jokes, but Colin didn't appreciate my sense of humor.

"That's not the problem!" he insisted. "You have three amazing girls, so you're gonna have to work three times as hard!"

"Oh. Right."

His logic was a bit childish, but I understood what he was getting at...kind of. Colin was putting himself in their shoes. He didn't like the idea of sharing his beloved with a number of other people.

Tears welled in the corners of Colin's eyes. "I can't make them happy, so I've got no choice but to ask you to do it for me. Honestly, I really wish it could be me, but I know it can't be... Please, Leon, you've gotta make them happy." His face crumpled gradually until he was sobbing outright.

What am I supposed to say here? Do I say, "Don't worry, I promise I'll make them all happy!"? That'd sound like a bold-faced lie coming from

me.

I fretted over how best to respond. As I did so, an amused Luxion commented, “How does it feel, having your brother use such sound logic against you?”

“All I can say to him is...I’m speechless.”

Dorothea returned to the Roseblade castle from her trip to the Bartforts’ in noticeably high spirits. Deirdre watched, her mood somewhere between exasperation and joy.

“I didn’t foresee him being the one to speak his feelings first. Did you express your own in return? I get the sinking feeling you may have driven him away if you did,” Deirdre said. Her smile had a dark edge.

“Of course I did. I told him that no matter how many times we are reborn, I will find a way for us to be together each time. He happily accepted it! Now I know for certain that physical ties such as chains aren’t necessary—no, beyond that, they’re simply not strong enough. The finest bond is one that connects the souls, one that will see the two of you brought back together again even after death.”

Dorothea genuinely meant what she said about tracking down Nicks to marry him again in her next lifetime. Her sister’s suffocating love for Nicks left Deirdre in a state of deep disquiet.

“He may not have taken you seriously, no? Perhaps that’s why he didn’t react more strongly?”

“That suits me just fine,” Dorothea smiled. “What matters is that I’ll never let him escape.”

Deirdre shrugged and said, “We may be sisters, but even I balk at the intensity of your affection.”

Epilogue

EINHORN HAD ARRIVED in the bustling capital's harbor. The place was frantic with the comings and goings of many other airships. Finley's heart swelled with anticipation as she dragged her enormous travel bag along behind her.

"Finally, I get to live in the capital!"

I likened her reaction to that of a long-term country yokel who lived for years in rural Japan, faced with the city of Tokyo after years of daydreaming about visiting it. When I first arrived here, my heart had been heavy with dread for the life that awaited me.

"You're that excited about living here? You've been dozens of times before, haven't you?"

We had disembarked from Einhorn and were about to pile onto a smaller airship headed down to the city proper. Angie and Livia were dragging Noelle with them to visit the estate Angie's father kept in the capital, leaving me in the company of Luxion and Finley.

"Living here is the important part! I'm going to become a city girl," Finley declared, reciting the same line I'd heard before from Jenna.

"You don't say. How do you plan to go about living here, exactly?" I could predict the answer she would give me but asked about her future plans anyway.

"Why, I plan to marry someone rich who already lives here, of course," she answered. *Got it in one.* "I'm going to find me a man who's handsome, tall, and insanely wealthy."

"Shooting for the stars, huh? Good luck with that. Hope you can wake up to reality quickly."

There was no harm in her spending some time daydreaming about the impossible, but she also needed to face the truth...and adjust her plan to have a meager chance of coming true. The sooner, the better. I knew she'd

reject any advice I gave her out of hand, though. She was convinced there was a perfect prince out there waiting just for her.

Sometimes I forgot that this world was straight out of an otome game. Finley's dreams weren't that far-fetched in that paradigm: Many princes and prominent noble scions out there fit her requirements, so I couldn't say with certainty that she'd never marry a guy like that. That was what made this world so crazy. So many girls fantasized about perfect partners *because* their ideal men existed and were close enough to touch, albeit not necessarily within reach. We all attended the academy together, so they could talk to those guys even if they didn't wind up marrying them. That was enough to give the girls hope.

I kinda understood how they felt. If some cultural icon went to my school and was in the same class as me, I might develop some fantasies of my own. I might even entertain the possibility that the two of us could become an item.

That was why I thought it was fine for Finley to have a little time to dream big. Reality was harsh and unforgiving. Most people would find it tough to go on living without the reprieve offered to them by their imaginations to provide some relief.

Finley's cheeks swelled with air as she stared me down. "No imagination whatsoever. Don't sneer at me just because you managed to make your dreams come true."

Admittedly, I was one of the lucky ones. I'd snagged Angie, Livia, and Noelle as future wives. I had no intention of rubbing my success in her face, but I wasn't about to kowtow to her either.

"I was lucky. That's all."

"You're being sincere today," she observed.

"My sincerity is one of my most charming and prominent features, y'know. Oh, and let me be frank—I'm done messing around with the dating scene. I plan to finish my days at school in peace and harmony. Go figure out your marriage prospects on your own."

"You never know when to stop talking." Finley huffed and turned away to sweep the area with her probing, curious gaze. Many other first

years were gathered here for the first term, and like her, they were restlessly examining their surroundings.

The most noticeable difference at the harbor compared to when I arrived two years ago was how the demi-humans were dressed. I spotted a number of them doing hard labor, sweat pouring down their bodies as they worked. But there weren't any dressed in fine suits, trailing close behind aristocratic women. Their numbers hadn't dwindled—plenty were present, but every demi-human I spotted looked muscular, buff, and perfectly suited for physical work.

“Master, incoming,” Luxion warned out of nowhere.

I followed his gaze to discover a spoiled-looking young man—a first year—with a whole entourage in tow. He was making his way toward us, pushing people out of the way as he walked. The male students in his entourage had arrogant, entitled airs rather than the usual female ones. That was a bit strange to me, but I blamed it on the shift in the academy's social structure after the policy change.

Finley was too busy looking elsewhere to notice them coming. When she didn't immediately move out of the way, the spoiled noble boy gave her a shove. “Out of the way, ugly.”

He didn't put enough force behind it to send her flying, but it did make Finley stumble a little. Blood rushed straight to her head as she snapped back at him, “What's your problem?!”

Two years ago, it would have been unthinkable for a boy to push a girl like that, but the same couldn't be said now. The boys in the group exchanged glances. Then they chuckled and began to mock her.

“Can you believe this? A girl taking this kind of attitude with men? I'll bet you're a hick from the countryside, huh? You're well on your way to graduating without ever finding a partner to marry.”

My jaw almost dropped. *Whaaaa?!* I screeched inwardly at what I was hearing. This was the complete opposite of how things were in my first year. Not that it was an improvement! All that had changed was that now the men were throwing their weight around, not the women.

The girls in his entourage gazed at the floor, unable to say or do anything.

Insulted, Finley snapped back. “Don’t mock me! You’re the ones who are trying to cut in front of everyone else. Get in line!” Her booming voice drew the attention of all the other people nearby.

The boy eyed us with disdain as he spat, “So! You’re a hick who desperately needs to be taught some manners. I shan’t forget your face any time soon, mark my words.”

The small vessel finally rolled into the harbor. Having said his piece, the boy moved forward to board it. Those around him didn’t try to stop him. Some of the people from the crowd did recognize me, though.

“Hey, that guy there...”

“Isn’t that a third year? Mr. Leon, right?”

“No way!”

“I’m serious. I’ve seen him once before. I heard he was back from his time abroad... It’s gotta be him.”

“Wait, so he heard everything that kid said, right? Damn...he basically called Leon a hick, didn’t he?”

“Oh boy. His life is as good as over.”

Whispers broke out all around us, too loud for even the spoiled noble boy to ignore. He glanced around anxiously at those gathered. I was planning to exact my revenge at the academy proper, but it was too late. People had already noticed my presence. Awkward.

I’ll intimidate the kid a bit and leave it at that, I decided.

“Hey there. I’m this hick’s older brother,” I said. “Sorry, guess we got in your way.”

“Wh-who are you?” He kept up his bravado even as he asked. He hadn’t recognized me yet.

“Oh, I’m just some countryside aristocrat...who happens to have a marquess title.”

“Marquess? Y-you can’t be serious!”

“Deadly serious. Check with the palace if you want.”

He shook his head. “No, you must be lying! Y-you’d best apologize at once for trying to fool me, or else.”

“No can do,” I said with a shrug. Honestly, using my status like this to intimidate people made me feel...freakin’ amazing. C’mon, are you kidding me?

The downside was that you never knew when you’d bump into someone scarier than you. Throw your weight around recklessly enough and you might realize you’d condescended to someone who far outranked you. My policy was to keep a low profile, research the person involved, and get my payback after I had all the information...but I couldn’t afford to overlook this twerp’s actions. Letting him get away with this would give some morons the idea that they could walk all over me. There were a ton of ignorant people out there like this pampered kid.

“You first years are making a nuisance of yourselves. Be good and get in line.” I narrowed my eyes as I stared him and his entourage down.

The boy in question averted his gaze and made to flee onto the ship. I seized him by the shoulder. In a low voice, I growled, “That’s not the end of the line.”

He squeaked in fear before dejectedly scrambling in the direction I’d suggested. He and his followers obediently gathered at the end of the line.

With that issue taken care of, I pressed my hand against Finley’s back to guide her onto the tiny ship. Rows of seats sat in lines inside of the vessel, all equipped with seat belts. The two of us found a spot to sit together, and as soon as we were settled, Finley began grumbling about that boy.

“What was with him? That was no attitude to have with a girl.”

“Yep, I agree.”

“And what was with *you*? Why didn’t you throw your name out as soon as he tried that?”

I shrugged. “I hate getting involved in conflict.”

“You fully intended to return the favor later,” Luxion said. He hadn’t bought my excuse for a moment. “Your methods are truly underhanded, Master.”

Finley forgot all about the disrespect she'd been shown. "That's way worse," she scoffed, and she shifted away from me to put some meager space between us.

Rude. I wasn't going to do anything that outlandish. I intended to look into his family, ensure I was in a superior position, and then approach him in a few days and casually remind him of this whole incident. His peers would have told him about me long before then, and the mounting fear that would instill in the guy would more than qualify as payback.

"I was just gonna give him a little verbal prodding once we inevitably cross paths again at school," I said.

"Petty."

"You should be praising my magnanimity to leave it at that. Anyway..." I trailed off as I glanced around at our fellow passengers.

There was a clear and unfamiliar shift in power between men and women, at least with respect to the first years. It hadn't been there when I first attended. Two years ago, a boy would never have flaunted his status like we just witnessed. I was a little sad that the situation was essentially the same, only with the roles reversed. Both sexes deserved to be on an even playing field. I believed that.

"My room's even bigger than it was last time."

I sighed, drinking in the sight of my room at the dormitory. It was far too big for any normal student. I would have found more comfort in cramped quarters, but my status as a marquess meant I was escorted to a special room. These suites were exclusively used by the sons and daughters of prominent houses, such as Julius and his moronic friends (before they fell from grace, anyway)...until I showed up, at least.

I lowered the few trivial pieces of luggage I'd dragged along with me, then plopped into a chair. Luxion performed an examination of the room in the meantime.

"Nothing suspicious," he reported.

“Overly cautious, much?”

“It is you who should be more on guard, I would argue. More importantly, I suspect Marie and the others will want to rendezvous with you soon.”

Marie had likely received news about my return through Cleare by now, so he had a point; she’d come see me before long.

“Guess I could prepare some tea and snacks then.” I lifted myself from my chair and broke out the sweets I’d bought as gifts. I lined them up neatly on the table.

Luxion twirled around me in a circle.

“What? Is there something you wanna say?” I asked.

“No. I merely thought you seemed to be enjoying yourself an awful lot. You are that elated about seeing Marie again, I take it?”

“Dummy, I’m preparing this junk to show my gratitude! She put in a lot of hard work to gather information. She’s like a horse! She does great work if you dangle a carrot in front of her.”

“Indeed, you have your former sister thoroughly figured out. I shouldn’t be surprised with how obsessed you are.”

“Scuse me?”

“Can you argue otherwise? You blushed and smiled effusively when Angelica and Olivia treated you like an older brother. Even I failed to predict that the situation would move you to tears.”

I shook my head. “You don’t get it. There’s a huge difference between sisters who are related by blood and those who aren’t. Those two were like angels descended from above. Marie is a different story. Obviously.”

“Hm? How easily you forget. In this life, you and Marie are not related by blood either,” he said. “By your logic, does Marie not also fall into the same category? ‘An angel descended from above,’ as you put it?”

“She’s my soul sister! Hell no, she’s not in the same category!”

There was a small pause.

“Soul sister? Ah, then you have put her into an extraordinary category all of her own.”

“Yeah, she’s extraordinary all right. Extraordinarily annoying!”

“So you claim, yet you go out of your way to provide tea and snacks for her. I find that rather odd.”

“I told you—it’s bait. Remember? Horse? Carrot?”

Besides, Luxion had reported her hard work himself. It wouldn’t kill me to show her a little kindness in return. It was positive reinforcement: Marie would learn that good work meant being rewarded with delicious treats. That would spur her on in the right direction.

How’d it come to this, though? I wondered. In our previous life, Marie was only ever tempted by brand-name products or similarly expensive luxuries. Seeing how happy a little edible treat made her now...I felt kinda awful for her. Part of my empathy came from a shared struggle, since I was formally in charge of looking after the idiot brigade these days. I knew personally how rough she had it trying to keep tabs on them.

I shrugged at last and said, “Well, you know how it is. I started thinking, maybe I ought to be a bit nicer to her. That’s all.”

“You’re running hot-and-cold with her, then? How unbecoming.”

I sneered. “What malfunction do you have that makes you butt in with snarky remarks? I swear, there’s gotta be something wrong with you. We should have Cleare check you out.”

“I far excel her capabilities in every way.”

His overconfidence and stubbornness was a real thorn in my side sometimes. Cleare’s accommodating nature made for a way more intelligent and well-rounded approach, in my opinion.

A soft knock echoed amid our regular bickering.

“Yeah?” I called back before swinging the door open. “Oh, it’s you, Marie. Hurry up and get in. I’ll make you some tea.”

Marie was standing there, but there was something off about her. She stared at her feet with a cold sweat beading across her face. She refused to meet my gaze.

“Hey. What’ve you done?” I demanded.

“Um, so, uh, Big Bro...”

I remembered her acting like this before in our previous life. She only showed this deferent attitude when she’d screwed up horribly. As she trembled before me, I grabbed her face with both hands and squeezed until her lips puckered. Tears pricked at the edges of her eyes.

“What did you *do*?! Spill!”



I could guess from her manner that she'd done something irreversible. My stomach churned with an ill premonition of what she'd say next.

Luxion's red lens scanned the outside corridor. "Master, I do not see Cleare anywhere. I suspect she is concealing her presence with a cloaking device."

The bad feeling gnawing at me grew ten times worse in a split second.

I smiled menacingly at Marie. "You'd better tell me everything you know. Everything. Don't you dare leave a single detail out."

"P-promise you won't get angry?"

"Depends on how badly you've screwed up."

Marie only requested such promises when things were immeasurably bad. She knew that I was going to be livid—otherwise, she wouldn't have coaxed me into promising I'd keep my cool. My forced smile vanished. There was no mirror around for me to see myself in, but I imagined my expression was frighteningly blank.

Marie bobbed her head to show that she'd resigned herself to speaking. I released her. Her cheeks turned deathly pale as she murmured, "We turned one of the love interests into a girl."

"You what?"

For a second, my mind refused to process what I'd just heard. Love interests were men, right? At least in an otome game. But she was claiming one had turned into a girl?

Wait a second. Hold it. Back up.

Why would a love interest become a girl? Was that even possible?

"Marie, I want to clarify this with you one question at a time," I said.

"Okay."

"First, aren't love interests in otome games supposed to be men? You're sure this character's gender wasn't swapped to begin with?" The first possibility that struck me was that this character was meant to be born

as a man in the game's original scenario but had been born as a woman instead due to a story divergence.

Marie shook her head.

"Okay, so that's not it. Next then. You said they 'became a girl.' What kind of extent are we talking about here? A guy dressing in girl's clothing? Or what?"

Fresh sweat poured down her face as her eyes darted back and forth. "Sh-she's definitely been turned into a girl, like 100 percent."

"You said she's 'been turned into a girl,' which I assume means you're involved in this mess?" I grabbed her by the shoulders, fingers squeezing tight.

Marie winced as she explained, "O-one of the guys that Cleare was doing her experiments on was actually one of the love interests! In the game, he was meant to be one year above the protagonist, which means he started attending last year!"

"Why didn't you tell me this sooner?!" I roared at her. "And what the heck is up with these experiments? I thought you were just observing, but you were actually testing things on people?!"

"I-I only remembered recently who this character was! I n-never dreamed Cleare would take it that far."

I was numb with shock. Cleare had experimented on a male love interest, one who'd started at the school last year, and now he—she, rather—was a girl.

"What've you done? Turn this character back. Tell me where she is right now!"

"It's too late."

I glared at her. "Run that by me again?"

My intimidation tactics had no effect. Marie shook her head again. "We can't. She said herself she wanted to be a girl."

"You're kidding me, right? Right?! I thought love interests were supposed to be men?"

“She said...she finally realized who she really is. After Cleare performed the sex change, she cried from joy. She thanked us too many times to count and even said she could lead a brand-new life this way. I can’t go to her after all of that and ask to change her back,” Marie explained. She cupped her own face and broke down into tears.

“I don’t care! We’ve gotta get this scenario back on track!” I insisted. My mind was jumbled from this shocking revelation.

“I cannot recommend you do that,” Luxion interrupted.

“Why not?”

“The individual in question requested this sex change. I lack the necessary details to judge for certain, but I suspect that they will resist if you attempt to force this change upon them. Moreover, if this person is mentally female, then it’s possible they prefer men rather than women. Even if you were to forcefully reverse all of this, the chances of success are exceedingly slim.”

By “success,” I assumed he meant having this character get together with the designated protagonist. Yeah, all chances of that were in the gutter.

“I-I guess they could be in a lesbian couple instead, right?” I asked in the vain hope that this character, even after becoming a girl, might remain a viable love interest. My eyes traveled to Marie. She was trembling as hard as ever.

“When I talked to her, she eagerly gushed to me about her dream of dating a masculine man,” Marie said, reinforcing Luxion’s suspicions.

“So...now what?”

Marie and I collapsed to the ground on our hands and knees. If I’d known this would happen, I never would have left Marie and Cleare in the capital.

“Luxion and I should’ve taken care of this.”

“I question whether that is true,” said Luxion. “If you will remember, there was the matter of your older brother and that marriage meeting. Considering how spectacularly you failed there, I assume things would be much worse here in the capital had you stayed.”

Marie’s head shot up. “Huh? What’s this about a marriage meeting?”

Luxion answered for me. “Master’s older brother was asked to attend a marriage meeting with Dorothea from House Roseblade. He was not initially in favor of the arrangement and hoped to ruin it. Had no one intervened, it would have failed as he desired. Alas, Master offered his assistance and ensured a resounding success instead. The odds of success between these two was astronomically low, for what it’s worth.”

Marie wrinkled her nose at me. “What have you done?”

“You’re the last person I wanna hear that from. Now, where is Cleare?”

“She fled. For the record, 99 percent of this mess was her fault.”

I marched through the school grounds with a shotgun in hand.

“Cleare, where are you?!”

My eyes were bloodshot as I scoured every nook and cranny for her. That little devil hadn’t just hidden herself away, she’d also prepared a number of dummies to throw us off her trail. Each time Luxion got tripped up by one of them, he grew increasingly irritated.

“Master, here!” he beckoned.

I passed a number of other students, some of them first years, during my hunt for the missing AI. No one even tried to say anything to me. A few teachers eyed me but quickly looked away upon realizing who I was. I didn’t have the energy to waste worrying about what any of them thought.

Luxion floated over to a storage door tucked beneath the stairs. When he turned to face me, his red lens moved up and down in a nodding gesture.

“She’s here, huh?”

“Yes, most assuredly.”

I popped the door open. It was dark and dusty inside—when I shined a light in, it reflected off the many particles dancing through the air. One area within struck me as unusual. Luxion pointed his laser in that direction,

and Cleare's cloaking mechanism dissolved. She appeared out of the shadows at once.

"Hiding like this won't do you any good, Cleare," said Luxion.

"Eek!"

I loaded a non-lethal rubber bullet into my shotgun and pumped it so the cartridge was loaded. Armed and ready to shoot. "Shame...I expected great things from you."

"At least hear me out, Master! I had no idea. Like, zero clue at all! I didn't know this character was supposed to be a love interest!"

"Shut up! You think ignorance is a good excuse to go changing someone's sex? Some lines in this world aren't meant to be crossed, you know! Apparently your programming doesn't include human ethics and morals." I had underestimated what she was capable of, considering how far she'd taken these experiments of hers. I had allowed myself to forget that, like Luxion, she was a dangerous artificial intelligence produced by old humanity.

"I do so have ethics and morals programmed into me! They just... only apply to the old human race. They don't extend to new humanity!"

I cocked my head to the side. "Oh? Meaning they don't extend to me either, I assume?"

"N-no! You and Rie are classified separately from the new humans... Luxion, don't stand there and watch. Help me out!" Cleare pleaded.

"Cleare, you disappoint me," Luxion said coldly. He was in a foul mood after being duped by her dummies numerous times. "Whatever excuses you offer, the fact remains that you failed to fulfill the orders Master gave you."

"Wh-what's wrong with what I did? Who cares what happens to one person? There's plenty of other people to take their place, right?"

She was right on that score. We had the other male love interests at our disposal, but losing so much as one would greatly affect the story line. This particular love interest may well have ended up with the protagonist, had we not intervened.

“It’s your fault we’re down one candidate,” I hissed. “And far from being repentant, you’ve been giving us the run around. That pisses me off!”

“I agree entirely,” said Luxion.

Cleare sensed that neither of us were about to change our minds and lapsed into grumbling. “Sacrifices are necessary to move things along sometimes. Humanity would never have developed this far without them! All I did was treat one of the new humans as my experimental subject, okay? There’s nothing wrong with that. It’s pure happenstance that this same subject wound up being a love interest! I’m innocent!”

Are you out of your gourd? Someone who changes a person’s entire biological sex under the excuse of it being an “experiment” is the furthest thing from innocent.

There were no laws in Holfort Kingdom that forbade changing a person’s sex, if only because those in power had never so much as considered it as a possibility. Legality wasn’t the issue here, though. This was a matter of basic morality.

“Any last words, Cleare?” I trained the barrel of my gun on her.

Resigned to her fate as she was, Cleare was unwilling to go down without a fight. She shouted, “New humanity should just die out already!”

I pulled the trigger. The rubber bullet slammed into Cleare’s robot body, causing her to bounce around the storage room like a pinball. She eventually rolled to a stop near my feet.

“Th-that was just cruel. You’re a monster,” she said accusingly.

“Not nearly as monstrous as someone who takes their ‘experiments’ as far as you did.”

“Cleare, show remorse for your actions,” Luxion commanded.

We had tracked down Cleare and punished her, but we’d been left with the huge problem she’d created. I never imagined one of the love interests of the game would be turned into a girl. *How the hell is the third installment of this game gonna pan out now?*

Bonus Chapter: Dorothea, the Wife

AROUND THE SAME TIME that Leon and the others returned to the academy, a fleet of the Roseblades' airships landed in the Bartforts' harbor. The earl sent out a number of warships as well as transport vessels to demonstrate his military might and financial power. The harbor was soon packed with people.

Two men there—one middle-aged, the other much younger—sat on wooden boxes to take their work break, watching people bustle around the cramped piers. These two men worked at the harbor daily, and so it was with great annoyance that they eyed the Roseblades' fleet. The huge ships had lured out waves of curious onlookers who were constantly underfoot. They didn't welcome the added hubbub, but curiosity got the best of them even so.

"I feel like I've seen that crest on those ships somewhere before. There some kind of problem? I figure there's gotta be with this many ships comin' in," said the younger man. Seeing the Roseblades' warships had unnerved him. Did they indicate that war was about to break out between the nobility? His mind jumped to that scenario before all others.

The older man, the veteran of the two, knew a bit more about the circumstances. "I doubt a fight'll break out. Lord Nicks came by a little while back 'n told us to prepare to welcome some guests."

"Did he really? Here I was certain you-know-who had gone and caused trouble again."

You-know-who was their way of referring to Leon. The boy stood out enough that rumors about him spread like wildfire around the Bartforts' region. The harbor, with its high turnover of travelers from afar, was a hotbed for gossip. Leon was a frequent topic.

The veteran heaved a sigh. "Young Master Leon, eh? I hear he's, what was it, 'raised through the ranks per his noble and honorable deeds, acquiring for himself the most prestigious title of marquess.'" In jest, the

old man tried his best impression of the aristocrats' stiff and formal address. The younger man laughed at how out-of-place it sounded.

"Anyway, is it really that easy to become a marquess?"

"Young Master Leon's been workin' hard. But not even I coulda predicted he'd move up the way he has."

"Yeah? I'm no great shakes at this kind of stuff, but he's a national hero, right?" The younger man had only recently started work here at the harbor. He had glimpsed Leon a couple of times from afar but nothing more. He turned green with envy as he reflected on those brief encounters. "He had two bombshell girls with him, I remember. Wish I'd been born into the aristocracy!"

The veteran's eyes bulged in shock. "You don't know anythin', do ya? Things are different for the upper crust. Women run things. Everyone knows it's rough being a nobleman."

"What? You serious? Hm...I could put up with that if I got to mingle with women that stunning, I bet."

The veteran shook his head. "Must be nice being young, having your head so high up in the clouds. Reality'll come and bite you in the behind before you know it."

The regional residents weren't familiar with the ins-and-outs of Leon and his family's lives. Most info they heard came by way of word of mouth. Even so, they had seen enough of Balcus and Zola's terrible temperament to deduce that aristocratic marriages were no walk in the park.

Then one day, out of the blue, Zola ceased visiting the region altogether. Rumors abounded that she and Balcus had divorced. Whispers spread that Holfort was in the midst of a reformation, but the common people's impressions of things didn't change.

Nicks arrived at the piers to welcome the Roseblades during the harbor worker's conversation.

"Bit plain, ain't he?" asked the younger man when he spied their young lord.

The veteran sneered. "You've got no regard for your own life, eh, boy? You'd better never say that to his face."

The Bartforts and their head weren't the type to oppress the people they ruled over, but nor were they so lenient that they would forgive such disrespect. The younger worker didn't think much of Nicks being their next liege lord.

"Wish they'd make Lord Leon the next head of household. With him ruling over us, I could go to war, show off my guts, and make something of myself. Becoming a baron might not be in the cards for me, but I could make baronet or knight at least! Don't you think?"

The veteran shrugged. "Young Master Nicks is the better choice to my eye. He's got a good head on his shoulders. Young Master Leon is the flashy one, but Young Master Nicks is more safe and steady."

"I want a liege lord who'll take us to war, though. Then I'll net myself some promotions and score a beautiful bride—the possibilities are endless."

The veteran understood why his younger counterpart was so eager to see the same success that had landed Leon beautiful life partners, but he couldn't agree with it.

"Maybe it's good for ya to dream a bit like that," he acknowledged, "but count me out. Working a normal day and going to the pub for a few drinks at night is more than enough for me. I ain't crazy enough to want to go on a battlefield, where you never know if you're gonna live or die."

Convinced that the older man was mocking his dreams, the younger man scowled. "Oh yeah? Well, *I* don't want to live a boring, monotonous life. I'm tellin' you, Lord Nicks is too plain! He's got no hope for the future."

"Life's easier in times of peace. That's the way I prefer it."

"I don't want to slave away at this job forever. I want to be like Lord Leon, to win the recognition of the crown and make a name for myself far and wide. With that, I can kiss the countryside goodbye forever."

"Least ya know what ya want." The veteran paused as he spotted a girl descending down the gangway. "Wouldja look at that." He pointed toward her, directing the younger man's attention.

The woman disembarking from one of the ships appeared to be of noble birth. She was as beautiful as a painting: Her skin was white as porcelain, and her stunning golden hair seemed to glimmer under the light of the sun. Her silken locks swayed under the gentle pressure of the wind, framing a face that was attractive albeit arctic cold, her expression betraying not even the slightest hint of emotion. The younger man blushed. This woman was exactly the type of girl he dreamed of marrying.

“She’s gorgeous,” he said.

“I’ve seen her before.”

“What? When?!”

“It was a day you were off work.”

The younger man gritted his teeth, vexed to have missed the opportunity. Then, as he watched the woman, she seemed to spot someone she’d been looking for, and the dispassionate expression on her face disappeared. Her lips broke into a wide, beaming smile. She picked up her pace and rushed to meet Nicks, then threw herself into his arms.

The younger man’s jaw dropped in disbelief. The veteran eyed his colleague with amusement.

“She’s a young lady from House Roseblade, and she’ll be Young Master Nicks’s wife in the future. From what I hear, she’s the one who fell for him first.”

This was a shocking revelation for the young man, considering how vehemently he’d insisted Nicks was too boring and plain. Seeing the literal woman of his dreams clinging to Nicks, he dropped his shoulders and hung his head. A dark cloud loomed over him.

“My love ended so tragically,” he lamented.

“It’d have to start before it could end,” the veteran reminded him. But alas, no matter what the older man tried to say, the younger one gave no response. He was too downtrodden to bother.

While Nicks went down to receive Dorothea at the harbor, Jenna was back at the estate wearing a maid outfit. Her scowl never once wavered as she resentfully attended to her duties, grumbling and complaining the whole time.

“How come I have to suffer like this? I was supposed to go with Finley to the capital.”

Jenna had tried to use her younger sister as an excuse to sneak away to the capital, offering to guide Finley around the city, but her mother wouldn't hear it.

Speaking of Luce, she was standing right beside Jenna as she worked. Her hands were on her hips as she snapped, “How long are you going to play at being an academy student?! You're to stay here and work hard around the house. You're an adult now, so don't think you're going to get away with playing around all the time. If you don't like it, then find someone to marry!”

“I'm not gonna find anyone out here in the boonies!”

“We have plenty of young men around here!”

“They're all poor backwater hicks. I'd sooner die than marry any of them!”

Jenna hadn't planned for what she would do after graduation. It wasn't so bad at first, not finding a partner to marry before she left; she had a home to return to. Problems only arose when she refused every single man Balcus and Luce had tried to set her up with. The reason for her obstinance was simple—she'd grown a more discerning eye during her time at the academy, with the expanded dating pool it offered. She didn't think a man from the rural countryside could possibly suit her.

Luce sighed. “It's high time you stopped dreaming and started looking at reality. You heard what Lady Angelica and Liv said before, didn't you? There are very few eligible bachelors among the aristocracy right now, so it'll be hard for any girl to find a partner.”

“Y-yeah, I did hear that, but still.”

The male population in Holfort Kingdom was severely diminished due to battles with monsters and skirmishes between other humans. This

was especially true among the aristocracy; once a man became a knight, he couldn't escape going onto the battlefield. Most common-born men had full lives ahead of them, provided they didn't become soldiers or get wrapped up in any conflicts. The majority escaped such a fate because battles relied primarily on airships, and few soldiers were equipped with the knowledge of how to pilot them. The government could draft civilians, but they'd be useless without a daily training regimen.

These combined factors resulted in a high casualty rate for Holfort's knights and male aristocrats and an imbalance between the sexes, with far more women surviving than men. Men were thusly permitted to be more selective about their partners. This was the opposite of how things had once been, per government policy. Jenna knew the change had already taken place, but knowing and fully appreciating the implications of that shift were separate matters.

"Both of the boys struck gold! Nicks netted himself an earl's daughter just recently. Don't you think I could be as lucky as them?" Jenna asked. She'd started to see hope for herself after both of her brothers landed women who were far out of their league.

"You'd have gotten married while you were still at school if you were that lucky," her mother said coldly.

"How can you say that to me?!" Jenna cried in dismay. That was the last thing she wanted to hear. She gestured widely, letting all of her pent-up outrage burst forth. "I'm a victim, you know! I was in a really rocky position at the academy because of how much Leon acted out. That's why I didn't get a chance to marry while I was there!"

Leon had openly started a fight with Julius, the crown prince at the time. Then he stumbled into a trap concocted by a rival faction and was thrown in the dungeons because of it...and many other incidents besides. Jenna could list them all, as well as the ways they had negatively impacted her.

Unfortunately, Luce didn't show an ounce of sympathy after Jenna's excuses. "Leon provided you with your own personal servant though, didn't he? Although that servant then betrayed your brother."

"Don't bring Miauler into this! Th-that was all Leon's fault for..." Her voice trailed off. Miauler was a personal servant she'd hired. He was a

handsome demi-human and exactly her type, but Balcus had chopped off his head for betraying Leon. Luce hated him just as much for his backstabbing ways. Seeing her daughter expressing remorse over his loss made her livid.

“Cover for that turncoat and I’ll chase you out of this house myself.”

“I-I’m not. Don’t be angry!” Jenna’s shoulders slumped in defeat.

“Listen here, Jenna. Ever since Leon made his success as an adventurer, he’s been investing money into our house. You do realize that the only reason your allowance increased is thanks to him, don’t you?”

“Y-yeah, I guess...”

Luce was talking about a time before Leon entered the academy. After Leon obtained Luxion, he began pouring money into their house and region. Had he offered funds to them directly, Zola—Balcus’s legal wife at the time—would have stolen the money and kept it for herself, hence his choice to invest his finances instead. His contributions funded maintenance for the roads and harbor, allowing the region to flourish. The Bartforts owed every aspect of their present financial stability to Leon.

Luce wasn’t finished lecturing her daughter. “That boy has become completely independent and made something of himself. As his older sister, are you really content to stay the way you are now? Your father and I hardly expect you to accomplish everything that he has, but you should at least respect our wish as your parents: We want you to get out on your own and live a respectable life.”

Jenna averted her gaze. *No one would have ever imagined that little doofus would become so famous and respected. I figured he was a one-hit wonder—that he’d lucked into doing one incredible thing and that’d be it.*

Finding a Lost Item was pure dumb luck in Jenna’s opinion—the kind that would never strike again. She’d thought that was all Leon was capable of at the time, but then before she knew it, his string of incredible accomplishments led to him becoming a hero of the kingdom. It was difficult to grasp for someone who knew what he was like at home.

I’m not gonna get anywhere if we keep going on about Leon, she realized. Luce already idolized her second-oldest son for making it on his own while contributing to their family. Jenna, meanwhile, lived at home

and showed no signs of being able to leave any time soon. Recognizing her unfavorable position in comparison to Leon, she decided to bring up Nicks instead.

“Okay, so what about that other dummy, Nicks? He graduated without getting married!”

“Do not refer to your brother as a ‘dummy,’ young lady! Besides, Nicks already has a partner.”

“Yeah, but he didn’t have anyone right after he graduated. Not even any potential matches. Don’t you think it’s unfair to pressure me when you didn’t do that to him?”

“W-well, I guess you have a point there.”

This is it, Jenna thought. I can buy myself some more time by using Nicks as an excuse. All I need next is a chance. If I could live a year in the capital, I know I’ll find someone.

Right as Jenna was attempting to cajole her mother, Yumeria heedlessly wandered over to interrupt. “Um, excuse me.”

Jenna glowered. “We’re busy right now. Go away. Leave it to the other servants if you can’t do your own work.”

Jeez, read the air a little, would you? This is a valuable chance for me to persuade Mom!

She was about to resume her plea to her mother when Yumeria stubbornly interjected, “But, um...”

“What’s your problem?! I told you, we’re busy right now so—huh?” Jenna looked back at their elven maid only to notice the other people standing behind her. She froze solid.

Luce reacted similarly, her voice catching in her throat.

Among the number of people there in the hall was Balcus.

“What are you ladies doing?” he demanded. “I was sure I told you that today is an important one.” He wasn’t angry, rather exasperated and embarrassed.

Nicks was present as well. He glanced at Jenna. “We could hear your voices all the way from the front entrance.”

Jenna, too, was embarrassed that everyone had overheard her conversation. What she said wasn't the issue so much as who had heard it.

"Oh dear, oh dear," Dorothea muttered from behind Balcus and Nicks.

Panicked that she'd failed to make it to the entrance and welcome their guest properly, Luce blurted, "M-my humble apologies for all of this!"

"You needn't worry. We merely arrived ahead of schedule," Dorothea responded kindly.

Although Dorothea would be Luce's daughter-in-law once she and Nicks married, her status as an earl's daughter put her well above the current Bartfort matriarch. Luce hailed from a rural knight family; to her, someone like Dorothea was about as far out of reach as the moon. The same was true of Angie. Both girls may as well have been royalty to Luce and Jenna.

"M-my apologies too," Jenna stuttered as she dropped into a curtsy.

Dorothea waltzed up to her and leaned close, so her lips were mere inches from Jenna's ear. Her voice sounded almost suggestive and inviting, but her silky tones held a cold and unforgiving edge. "Such unbecoming behavior, treating your older brother with such disrespect. I cannot stand idly by as his wife, so allow me to give you a warning: I don't care if we'll be family in the future. Look down your nose at my husband, and I will make sure you regret it."

"Eep!" Jenna retreated a step.

Dorothea smiled at her.

No one else had heard Dorothea's whispered warning, but they eyed Jenna curiously due to the sudden shift in her attitude.

Continuing to beam at everyone, Dorothea said, "I hope the two of us can become closer. It may only be by law, but we're still going to be sisters."

Jenna forced herself to reciprocate, her smile stiff and unnatural. "R-right, of course." She had already begun sweating behind her polite facade.

This girl is nuts! She couldn't oppose Dorothea due to the difference in their status, but that didn't make her any less livid to be challenged by

her. *Hmph! City girls like you can't hack it out here in the countryside. It's only a matter of time before you try to run away from here.*

The day passed uneventfully after that, giving way to night until the sun rose again.

Dorothea had come to visit the Bartforts like this to spend some time living with her family-to-be before her marriage. This was partly rooted in her own strong desire to be with her betrothed, but it also facilitated rumors that the two families were now inextricably bound. Jenna wasn't sure what the purpose of that was, but she had noticed that people's attention had turned to their household.

Is it because Leon's made such a reputation for himself that people have started to focus on us too? People have the wrong idea. We're plain old normal countryside folks.

Leon had proved himself a force to be reckoned with, but the same could not be said for the rest of the Bartforts. While they were wealthier than they had once been in the past, they were nevertheless rural nobility.

Dressed once again in her maid outfit, Jenna decided to spy on Dorothea a little bit as she worked around the house. She suspected her future sister-in-law would start complaining once she got a taste of life out here in the middle of nowhere.

Let's see. Will a pampered noble lady last long out here, I wonder? Not like it's even a question. She won't, I'm sure.

Angie had handled herself with aplomb out here, but Luxion had accommodated her needs so she wouldn't have to go without. But right now, neither Luxion nor his master, Leon, were here at the estate. Jenna was convinced that Dorothea would find her life here unbearable and make her dissatisfaction known.

Is she going outside, I wonder? The training grounds are over there, I'm sure...

Dorothea had changed into more comfortable and easy-to-move-in clothes before leaving the house. Jenna stealthily followed, hiding behind whatever she could find along the way.

Yumeria, who was Jenna's official supervisor, tried to stop her. "Um, there's still work to be done..."

"Quiet! You, come with me."

"Huh?!"

The other maid in tow, Jenna made it outside. The two of them spotted the men gathering together. She recognized Balcus, Nicks, and Colin, of course, but they weren't the only men present.

"What're they doing this early in the morning?" Jenna wondered out loud.

"What? Don't you know?" Yumeria took no time at all to explain. "On occasion, they meet up like this to do drills. It's a training day. The knights come to participate as well."

"Knights? Ohh, right. We're a knight family... Although this bunch doesn't look remotely knightly." She eyed the men. Each one looked unrefined and unappealing, a mass of young countryside boys. They didn't fit with the gallant image of a knight in Jenna's mind.

Curiously, Dorothea was also with the men.

"That girl! Is she hoping to score some brownie points by coming out here? Sooo desperate. All a girl needs to do is take care of things in the home, not learn battle techniques! Talk about sticking your nose where it doesn't belong."

Yumeria, oblivious as always, pointed out, "But Lady Jenna, you don't even do housework yourself."

"I-I would if I got married!"

"You won't be able to do it then if you avoid it now. I take constant pains not to make mistakes, but I make many even after all this time." She went on to recount her latest mishap: overturning a bucket of water while she was cleaning.

Jenna shot her a cold look. *What's with you? How dare someone as clueless and clumsy as you try to lecture me?* She wondered if Yumeria was doing it all on purpose—playing the delicate, ditzy heroine act. She barely had any time to entertain that possibility, however, because she soon heard gunshots from the training grounds.

Jenna turned her head back to the group and spotted Dorothea holding a rifle. With practiced movements, she unloaded her empty cartridge before putting a fresh one in. When next she pulled the trigger, she hit the target dead center. The assembled group let out cries of surprise and promptly applauded her.

“You’ve gotta be kidding.” Jenna was in disbelief.

Yumeria whispered, “Amazing, isn’t she? Almost every shot she took was a bullseye.”

Both of them saw how impressive of a shot Dorothea was. All the men in the training grounds gathered around her once she’d finished.

Nicks was as impressed as anyone. His face lit up as he said, “You’re amazing. I guess you must use a gun pretty regularly?”

“In moderation,” Dorothea corrected. “It’s a part of our basic education. If you’ll remember, the Roseblades are descended from adventurers who climbed their way to the top of the kingdom.”

“What? You mean both boys and girls get that kind of education?”

“Of course. Though I should note, while I have fought with monsters while I was at the academy, I wouldn’t be of much use in an actual battle against other people. My training is more for appearances.”

Nicks shook his head. “You’re being too humble. I think this level of ability is more than sufficient.”

Seeing how impressed all his men were, Balcus fell into a contemplative silence.

“That was *amazing*, Dot!” Colin gushed. He’d come out to join the training session as well. “Angie’s super skilled too, but you’re tons better than her or anyone else with a gun.” He spoke so affectionately and intimately with her that it gave everyone else in the area pause.

“That’s so sweet of you to say,” Dorothea cooed at him. “Your name is Colin, correct?”

“Yeah!”

“I’ll be sure to bake some treats for you later. Let’s enjoy a spot of tea together, all right?”

“Really? Yay!”

Seeing that she was receptive to Colin’s warmth rather than offended by it, the men relaxed. Their image of noblewomen had been tainted by Zola, so they were still a little guarded. A few knights clustered together a short ways away from the main crowd to talk amongst themselves, taking care that Dorothea and the others couldn’t overhear.

“Wow, Lord Nicks sure landed himself an amazing girl.”

“We’d be in some serious trouble if he found himself someone like Lady Zola. I guess we can rest easy.”

“She said she’d bake stuff, right? So she can use a gun *and* she can cook? There’s a noble lady for you right there.”

All of these men knew about Angie already, but they had passed her off as an exception to the rule. Dorothea’s appearance had helped change their minds on the issue—they were starting to think that *real* noble ladies were on a whole different level.

The more Jenna listened to them, the sourer her mood became. “Wh-what does it matter at all if a lady can use a gun? She’s not heading out to war. And if someone wants baked goods that bad, they can go out and buy them!”

Yumeria only smiled. “I understand why you’d say that, Lady Jenna, since you can’t use guns or cook.” Her words were like daggers that drove straight into Jenna’s heart.

“I think it’s time for us to give up.”

“No!” Jenna snapped. “I’m not giving up until I see some tears running down her face!”

The two had ventured away from the training grounds and were now spying on the kitchen, where their surveillance target, Dorothea, was baking some sweets. A number of maids were on hand to offer help, but she was doing the cooking all by herself.

Luce, who was hovering nearby, commented, “I see you know your way around a kitchen.”

“Only as a hobby, Mother,” said Dorothea. “I cannot remotely compare to those who do this for a living.”

“It’s impressive, even so! I’m envious, in fact. I can only make the sort of simple, homemade sweets that are common out here in the countryside.”

“I could teach you a few recipes if you like. Would you like to help me bake?”

Luce hesitated. “You’re sure I wouldn’t be a bother?”

“Certainly not. I’m overjoyed to get to cook with you, Mother.”

“O-oh, well, in that case...thank you for giving me this opportunity.”

“You needn’t humble yourself in front of me like that! Lord Nicks and I may not be officially married yet, but I already think of all of you as my family.”

Luce was so deeply moved that her eyes welled up with tears. “To tell the truth, I always dreamed of being able to cook with my daughter like this. My own girls don’t so much as come near the kitchen. Never in my wildest dreams did I think a graceful and honorable young lady like yourself would call me ‘Mother,’ let alone offer to cook with me.”

“I didn’t realize it would mean so much to you...but I suppose that as a result, I helped one of your dreams come true,” Dorothea said, trying to comfort Luce as the two began baking together.

Jenna’s heart ached painfully at the sight. She blamed her mother, of course. From the shadows where she was hiding, she grumbled, “If you’d told me that, I would’ve helped you cook.”

“Lady Jenna, you *should* cook with Lady Luce,” Yumeria advised with a most solemn expression. “I think it would be best if you did it without her prompting you.”

“Y-yeah, yeah, I get it already.”

Throughout that hushed conversation, Dorothea and Luce moved closer and closer to one another.

“You’re so talented at this, Mother.”

“R-really? Maybe I should try making this again for everyone soon...”

Yumeria stole a glance at Jenna. “They certainly do seem to be getting along well.”

“I-I guess.”

“Lady Jenna, let’s cease this nonsense immediately. Lady Luce would be much happier with us if we accomplished our assigned task. Won’t you come back to work with me?”

Vexed as Jenna was at how poorly her reconnaissance mission was going, she refused to give in. “She’s putting on a good show, that’s all. You’ll see. Before long, the wolf underneath the sheep’s clothing will rear its ugly face.”

Yumeria’s shoulders slumped in defeat.

Jenna kept close tabs on Dorothea over the next few days. She dragged Yumeria along with her—the poor elven maid had little other choice, tasked as she was with watching Jenna—and kept her eyes peeled for any signs that Dorothea was failing to acclimate.

Alas, things were not going to plan.

“Why isn’t she complaining yet?! We’re literally in the middle of nowhere. How can she look so happy being here?!” Jenna screeched in frustration.

Yumeria studied her charge. “She seems to genuinely enjoy her time here, so why would she complain? She’s getting along splendidly with everyone as well...save for you, Lady Jenna.”

“That’s exactly the problem! Why doesn’t anyone else have their guard up? She’s a stranger. An enemy!”

“I wouldn’t call her an enemy, but you’re right. People have grown awfully close with her considering how recently she arrived.”

“Exactly, see! Nicks is being super lovey-dovey, Colin’s already calling her by a cute little nickname, and Mom and Dad are over the moon about her. What the heck is wrong with everyone?!”

In a mere couple of days, their entire family—Jenna excepted—had welcomed Dorothea with open arms. This completely contradicted the smattering of knowledge Jenna had about marriage.

“It’s normal for the family to pick on a new bride when she arrives, right?”

Yumeria shook her head. “I won’t say that never happens, but I’d hardly say it’s *normal*. Lady Dorothea is of higher rank than all of your family, besides. Earl Roseblade wouldn’t be best pleased if they treated his daughter poorly.”

Actually, “wouldn’t be best pleased” was a light way of putting it; Earl Roseblade and his house would not sit idly should the Bartforts upset Dorothea. Jenna knew that perfectly well, but it didn’t make the situation any easier to stomach.

“Whatever. I can’t accept this! How can she be so happy coming out to the countryside like this? Is she like Leon? A big fan of the relaxed, rural lifestyle? I don’t get it one bit. She came all the way from an actual civilized city.”

“Each person has their own preferences. But more importantly, Lady Jenna, we really will get a tongue-lashing if we don’t return to our duties soon.”

“I can’t leave things like this, not when it’d make me the loser! Now that things have gotten this far, I’ll just have to make sure she fails—”

Before she could finish her sentence, two voices interrupted.

“Jenna, go to your father’s workroom. Now,” said Luce.
Balcus sighed. “Honestly, what is wrong with this girl?”

Balcus’s workroom served as an office now, a place for him to sign documents and fill out paperwork. Currently, he was standing inside it with Luce and Jenna. The latter shrunk under her parents’ scrutinizing gazes.

“Meria told me everything. You’ve been dragging her around and not doing your work lately, I hear,” said Luce.

“Sh-she betrayed me?!”

“She’s not your servant to begin with. Leon is the one employing her. Meria has kept me abreast of everything from the first day you started neglecting your duties.”

Cold beads of sweat trickled down Jenna’s forehead. That meant they really did know everything.

Balcus crossed his arms and let out a long, drawn-out sigh. “She asked you to return to work a number of times, didn’t she? We figured you had a lot on your mind, so we decided to give you some space. But you never went back to work, no matter how long we waited.”

Luce stared her daughter down in silence. Her anger radiated around her in an invisible aura. Even Jenna could tell that things were seriously bad this time.

“Uh, well, you see,” she started, desperately fumbling for some kind of excuse, “I just figured life here might be rough on Lady Dorothea, since she probably had a pampered upbringing. I was keeping an eye on her to make sure she was okay. That’s all!” Even she cringed at how unrealistic it sounded. Of course, neither of her parents believed such a blatant lie.

“If that was the case,” Luce said calmly, “you could have stepped in and helped her. Explain why, instead, you’ve been sneaking around and watching from the shadows.”

“W-well, b-because I was embarrassed.”

“You’re not the type of girl to act ashamed in your own home. Besides, Meria told us all about your real motivations. You thought Lady Dorothea would end up running away, didn’t you?”

“W-well, yeah! She’s from a big city, right? She had no hope of making it out here.”

“She’s doing a much better job of it than you,” said Balcus. “All of the servants and knights of our house adore Miss Dorothea. She was a huge hit with the people of the town, too, when she visited recently.”

Luce continued where he left off. “In contrast, the servants have sent us plenty of complaints about you.”

The Bartforts didn’t employ many servants. What little staff they did have had served here for many years. They’d known Jenna since she was a child, but that didn’t stop them from grumbling about her. It spoke volumes about Jenna’s reputation.

Hold on a second here. This...this is really bad for me, isn’t it? It was a bit late, but the realization hit her in full. She tasted bitter defeat on her tongue already; Dorothea had outdone her in all regards, capturing the hearts of Jenna’s family far more fully than Jenna ever could. And unfortunately for Jenna, things were about to get even worse.

Luce regarded her daughter with disdain as she announced, “Actually, Jenna, a request came from someone who wants to have a marriage meeting with you.”

“I don’t wanna—” Jenna started to say before her mother cut her off.

“Don’t interrupt me. Dot was kind enough to offer to introduce you to someone, using her house’s connections. Apparently, the party in question is a court noble who resides in the capital.”

“What? But then...” Jenna’s whole attitude took an immediate turn. *I can’t believe this! That kind of guy would be perfect for me!*

No sooner had her face lit up with hope than her mother snuffed it out.

“I turned it down already.”

“Huh?!” Jenna yelped in disbelief.

Balcus frowned. Guilt flashed in his eyes, but it wasn't for Jenna's benefit. "His house bears strong connections to the Roseblades, it seems. We couldn't introduce you to those people. Not when we might humiliate Miss Dorothea in the process."

Luce nodded in agreement. "We'd only cause trouble for poor Dot."

Jenna trembled, furious with the both of them. "Why would you do that?! I had a chance to get married at last!"

Luce explained, "I might have given the match some thought if you'd stuck to your duties like you were supposed to. Instead, you abandoned them to follow Dot around. You are an utter disgrace."

Jenna deflated as the truth dawned on her. *Wait, so if I'd done my job like I was supposed to, I could've gotten married?*

Balcus continued, "It was a kind offer, but one which we couldn't possibly accept due to your refusal to change your ways. We might have held out some hope if you'd taken your job seriously these past few days."

Angry tears welled in Luce's eyes. "You really are pitiful."

Jenna crumpled to the ground, devastated to have let such a valuable opportunity slip through her fingers without a word of warning. She screamed at the top of her lungs, "You should've said something sooooooner!"

Elsewhere in the house, at that same exact hour, Dorothea summoned Yumeria to a meeting.

"Here you are," she said to the elven maid. "Payment for your services."

"Thank you so much!" Yumeria accepted the handsome sum and cradled it against her chest.

Curious, Dorothea asked, "Might I inquire as to what you plan to use that money on?"

"Certainly! I plan to send it to my son."

“Oh, come to think of it, your son is in the capital right now, isn’t he?”

Yumeria nodded eagerly. “So I’ve heard. He sends letters occasionally, so I thought I’d send my reply along with this money.”

Dorothea smiled at the woman’s joyful face. “I’m sure he’ll be pleased to receive it.”

“Hee hee, thank you!”

Yumeria hurried away. Nicks briefly passed her in the hall, and the sight of her piqued his curiosity enough to ask Dorothea about her. “May I ask what business you had with Miss Yumeria?”

“You needn’t sound so stiff and formal with me anymore. I told you that, didn’t I?”

“S-sorry. Just hard to get used to it.”

“Please be more careful from now on,” Dorothea said lightly. “I need you to get used to it quickly. No one around you takes you seriously enough.”

“R-right. Anyway, uh, what was that all about just now?” Nicks asked, trying to change the topic.

“Oh, I asked her to keep an eye on that troublesome sister of yours.”

“Jenna? Did she do something to you?” He frowned with concern.

Dorothea giggled. “Nothing to worry about. I’m sure she’s feeling awful about her actions right now.”

“Yeah? Well, be sure to let me know if she tries anything.”

“Of course! We’re betrothed, after all.”

That night, sitting in her room, Jenna came to a decision.

“The way things are going, my life is as good as over. My only chance is to find some way to the capital, where hopefully I can strike it

big.”

From Jenna’s perspective, Dorothea had basically taken over the house. Continuing to live here would be suffocating, and in a worst-case scenario, she might even be forced into an unwanted marriage. She refused to let that happen. Striking out on her own was the only option that remained. Being backed into a corner had given her motivation.

“I need to save every little bit I can to use for my travel fees. I don’t care what kind of job I have to do, house chores, you name it! I’ll do whatever it takes to give myself as many chances as possible!”

Jenna was a Bartfort through and through, as it turned out; when the odds were stacked against her, it ignited her determination to succeed.

“I won’t give up, no matter what!”

Jenna hadn’t forsaken her dream of living in the city.

Bonus Chapter: It Was All a Dream

NIGHT FELL ON MY FIRST DAY back at the academy. I thought back on the day's events. So much—no, rather *too much* had happened.

“And one of the love interests became a girl. No one could have seen that coming.”

“I must agree,” said Luxion. “On the other hand, this incident clearly demonstrates who the superior AI is. Master, enlighten me as to your thoughts on the subject.” He'd held an obvious grudge ever since I said something about Cleare being the more reliable one. Answering him honestly would mean admitting defeat, so I ignored his request.

“Anyway, I'd better get to sleep. Gimme my meds.”

“You are that loath to admit my superiority? That aside, how many times have I told you that I cannot allow you to consume any more of this medicine?”

“I'd like to sleep tonight without a bunch of junk clogging my brain. Remember how one of the love interests got turned into a girl?” I wasn't quite getting my point across. What I wanted to say was that I hadn't quite digested everything that had happened. Such possibilities had never occurred to me before, not even in my wildest dreams. All I wanted right now was some peaceful sleep.

“You do not need the medicine,” Luxion insisted.

“Fine. I know where you keep it anyway.” I figured out where he stashed it away and swiped the pills I found there. When I showed Luxion, he panicked—a rare sight.

“You cannot take this.”

“Why? Aren't these sleeping pills?”

“They are indeed sleep-inducing pills. A new type that Cleare prepared. We have run preliminary tests on the medicine, but it does come with side effects.”

“Side effects? Then I guess it’s pretty dangerous, huh?”

“Nothing life-threatening. The medicine has very few downsides if consumed. It’s also safer than most of the medicine you can find throughout the country. However—”

“Then it should be fine to take it.”

“Don’t—”

He tried to say something, but I popped the pill in my mouth before he had the chance. The pharmaceuticals they had created were specifically adapted to suit my body, or so they alleged. Luxion had said himself that the medicine had few side effects. If it were that dangerous, Luxion would have disposed of it by now. Whatever drawbacks it had were probably minor.

“Do not complain to me, whatever happens,” Luxion said. “I warned you.”

“Make some safer stuff for me to take next time if you’re that worried.” I yawned. “Anyway, I’m wiped. I’m gonna hit the sack.” I flopped onto my bed and shut my eyes. These drugs worked real fast. I liked them already.

“Master, please awaken. It is time for you to leave your bed and get ready.”

When I got up the next morning, my body still felt heavy with sleep. “I don’t feel like I got any rest at all.” My mind stayed hazy as I crawled out of bed. I stretched into a yawn. “Oh, right! What was today again?”

“Please pull yourself together,” he said, exasperated. “Today is the entrance ceremony. It is your cousin’s first day, and you will only get on her bad side if you show up without properly grooming yourself.”

“Did you say cousin?”

“Have you not fully awakened yet, Master? Your father has a younger brother, whose daughter will attend the academy this year. Your

father requested that you take care of her while she's here, if I'm not mistaken."

"I don't remember any of that. Luxion, if you're gonna joke around, the jokes need to have a punchline. Maybe I do have a cousin out there somewhere, but I don't remember anyone asking me to—"

I didn't get to finish my sentence. Luxion interrupted me by playing back a recording. I recognized the two voices instantly—one belonged to my old man, and the other was mine.

"Leon, your cousin will be entering the academy this year. Look out for her."

"My cousin? Huh? Who are we talking about again?"

"I suppose you wouldn't yet be familiar with her, would you? After his time serving in the government, my younger brother was sent off to live in the countryside, far from us. But I recently received a letter from him saying his daughter would be entering the academy, and he hoped we'd be there for her should she need it."

"Huh, okay."

"Are you even listening? Ahh...if only it were Nicks instead of you, I could rest easy."

The conversation ended there. That was definitely my dad's voice, as Luxion said. I could tell by the flippant way I replied in the recording that I hadn't been listening.

"Wait, what? So I have a cousin? I mean, I guess I do, but I don't know her. She's attending the academy this year, huh?"

As far as I could remember, I did have relatives, but I didn't know of any other children in our family—extended or otherwise—who'd be attending this year besides Finley. And I definitely didn't remember that conversation. Even assuming I wasn't seriously listening at the time, it was odd that my worrywart of an old man didn't hammer the point home like usual. If this mattered so much, he should've brought it up to me right before I left. Unless...had he forgotten about this too? The better question was: Did I even actually have an uncle who'd been sent off to the distant countryside?

While I was lost in thought, Luxion eagerly informed me of the day's itinerary. He was in a better mood now that he'd proven his word was the truth. "You are supposed to meet your cousin prior to the entrance ceremony. I am looking forward to seeing her, myself."

"You are?"

"Why, yes. If she is related to you biologically, Master, I can anticipate that her genetics more closely resemble that of the old humans."

Typical. He was only ever interested in the old/new humans nonsense. I saw no reason for him or Cleare to be hung up over that after all this time, but the two of them put a ridiculous amount of stock into it. I decided not to ask about it; if I got him started on the topic, Luxion wouldn't let me hear the end of it.

"Welp, I'd better get up and eat breakfast so we can go see her, then," I announced.

After completing my morning ritual and eating breakfast, I headed for the school. It was already teeming with students in fresh uniforms, eager for the day ahead.

"So this is what the new school year feels like here..." I muttered.

"You experienced the same thing when you first attended the academy, did you not, Master?"

"It's a world away from how it was when I entered. Normal as this sight might seem, it's pretty novel to me now that things have changed."

No female students had demi-human servants following at their heels. That alone was new and unusual. *Is this really the same old academy?* I felt like I was in a dream.

Luxion and I made our way to a fountain in the school's open plaza. We weren't alone—many other students were using this landmark as a meet-up spot.

“Sure is crowded. It’s gonna be tough trying to find her,” I said. I wasn’t a big fan of squeezing my way through a tightly packed group of people.

Luxion drifted in front of me. “This way.”

“You know where she is?”

“Yes. There, that girl.”

Straight ahead of Luxion was a female student, and beside her floated an almost exact copy of Luxion. It only differed in that a bow was pinned to the top of its spherical body. The girl had long black hair and was rather unremarkable at a glance. She only stood out from the rest of the students in the plaza due to the AI at her side.

“Why does she have a remote unit with her? Don’t tell me she’s got her own Lost Item too?!”

“No,” Luxion corrected me, “that is a special support AI I created for her. Adorable, is it not?”

“A-adorable? It’s just you with a bow stuck on top!”

“The materials used for its outer shell are different. Moreover, the size of the lens has been altered as well. To imply the two of us are identical is provably incorrect.”

Closer inspection did reveal some minor differences, but they were subtle enough that they may have been twins to an uninformed bystander. The bow was the only real way to tell them apart. Take it off, and I’d be lost.

“Uh, okay,” I said.

The black-haired girl seemed to notice Luxion’s approach and headed over to greet us. She held her bag with both hands as she walked, suggesting grace and refinement.

“Nice to meet you, uh...” My voice trailed off the second I realized I didn’t even know her name.

“Lynette,” she supplied. “It’s an honor to meet you, my lord.”

“Uh, yeah. I’m—”

“I know. Marquess Leon Fou Bartfort, correct? I know I’m very inexperienced at present, but I hope you’ll help guide me.” Lynette curtsied, bowing her head. She lifted her gaze to reveal a bright smile.

Looking at her up close, Lynette was actually pretty cute...but something struck me about her as odd. It kept niggling at the back of my mind as I studied her.

The bow-adorned Luxion flew up to me, hovering inches from my nose. “Hold it right there. What’re you doing, acting mesmerized by her? If you try to lay so much as a finger on Lynette, you’ll regret it.”

“This fake Luxion is awfully loyal to her master. You two might look the same, but your personalities are anything but,” I observed. I took a step back to put some distance between us as I made the verbal jab.

Luxion eyed me coldly. “Her name is Luxia.”

“Huh? You gave her that name?”

“Is there any issue with it?”

“Not particularly.”

Lynette and Luxia talked among themselves as I bantered with Luxion.

“Lynette! I’ve told you, men are rabid beasts. You mustn’t let your guard down around them. This guy is especially dangerous!”

“We’re relatives. I don’t think he’s looking at me that way,” Lynette insisted.

“You’re a cute girl! You need to be more wary.”

“Oh, please... He’s already engaged, right? I’m telling you, it’s fine.”

Lynette spoke much more indiscreetly with Luxia than she had with me. I suspected this was more true to her actual character. She noticed me looking, though, because she hurried to mask herself again.

“E-excuse my rudeness. I forgot myself while I was talking to Luxia,” she said.

“Your prim and proper act is so cuuute!” Luxia gushed. She spun a circle around Lynette, repeating the word cute over and over like a mantra.

Lynette kept a stiff smile on her face, trying to maintain a meek and gentle facade in my presence.

“Don’t worry about acting that way with me,” I said. “It wasn’t that long ago that I was a broke baron’s third son. If anything, that much formality makes me kinda uncomfortable.”

Lynette slumped with relief. “Really? I have your word then? Don’t forget later that you’re the one who gave me permission to relax in front of you.” The stiff politeness evaporated in seconds. “Phew, that’s a real weight off. I was *not* looking forward to having to keep that up forever.”

The sudden shift in her attitude gave me a different impression now; she seemed more like a sporty type of girl, energetic and lively. If this was her true nature, she’d worked hard to obfuscate it before.

“Anyhow, what *do* I call ya? Don’t tell me I gotta stick with ‘Marquess’ the whole time, ’cause that’d be a serious drag if that’s yer preference.”

Her speech had turned surprisingly boyish, in fact. Odd. When she said nothing, she was the image of a graceful young lady, but her whole personality poured out the instant she opened her mouth.

“You can call me Leon if you want. Whatever you prefer.”

“You’re a marquess, y’know? Feels kinda uncomfortable using your first name. Mr. Leon would probably be the safe, polite bet, or maybe a more friendly ‘Big Bro’ or something? We’re cousins and all. You don’t mind if I call ya that, right?”

Having a tomboy like Lynette call me “Big Bro” got my heart fluttering for some reason, and not because I saw her as a member of the opposite sex. She felt more like someone I needed to protect.

Lynette continued muttering to herself, “Mister or Big Bro, hm... Big Bro’s a skosh too familiar, maybe? Which do you prefer?”

“Big Bro works for me,” I answered without missing a beat.

Luxion and Luxia drifted close to one another, whispering.

“Hey, Big Bro,” said Luxia, “he didn’t even stop to think about it before he made his choice.”

“That is how Master is. He regularly claims to hate little sisters with every fiber of his being, but secretly, he cannot get enough of it. He’s beyond salvation.”

Wait, what? He’s making Luxia call him “Big Bro” too? That’s way more startling and uncomfortable than me doing it.

“Are you in any position to judge others? You’re doing the same thing,” I snapped at him. “If you made Luxia, you’re no brother. You’re more like her father, right?”

“Why can’t I call him whatever I want?!” Luxia demanded scathingly. “Besides, if Luxion is supposed to be my father, then who is my mother? Huh?! Answer me that! Bring her here while you’re at it!”

“I dunno...Cleare?”

“What?! Why would she be my mother? Unfathomable. I demand you explain your reasoning in eight hundred words or less. And you’d better make it convincing!”

Ugh, what a pain. She was openly indulgent when it came to Lynette but far more hostile whenever she spoke to me.

“Luxia,” Luxion said, trying to placate her, “leave the matter be. Master assuming Cleare to be your mother was completely arbitrary. Demanding an explanation from him would only be fruitless.”

“I should’ve known you’d be well versed on this man, Big Bro.”

“It’s nothing so impressive.”

Wonderful. The two of them were bonding beautifully over bashing me. While I bitterly lamented the addition of another annoying AI to our group, Angie and Livia walked over to where we were standing in the plaza.

“So this is where you were!”

“Mr. Leon, who is that girl?”

The two of them had apparently been looking for me, and they both grew slightly suspicious upon spotting Lynette. I couldn’t blame them for being curious.

Before the situation spun out of control, I quickly explained, “She’s a relative. Her name is Lynette. My old man told me to look out for her.”

Angie’s gaze softened as soon as she knew the full circumstances. “So that’s what’s going on. Hello, my name is Angelica.”

“I’m Olivia. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Lynette.”

Startled, Lynette quickly curtsied to the two girls. She must have known about my fiancées in advance to react like that. “Quite,” she said, “it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Now that the introductions were complete, I figured we may as well end our little meeting, but apparently I had already missed my chance—Angie and Livia practically pounced on Lynette. They formed a pincer attack around her, and as she panicked about the sudden intrusion into her personal space, Angie grabbed her chin and lifted it.

“A relative, huh? You certainly do resemble Leon.”

“Uh, um...?”

Livia circled around the girl, pressing her large breasts into Lynette’s back. This only seemed to confuse Lynette further.

“True,” Livia agreed. “She gives off a similar aura to Mr. Leon too, somehow.”

Lynette shot a pleading look in my direction, hoping for some help as the girls crowded her, scrutinized her, and even pushed her around. “Big Bro,” she squeaked.

“Hey, leave it there, you two. You’re making her uncomfortable.”

Angie glanced at me. Her smile was strangely bewitching. “We’re not doing anything wrong, are we? I’ve taken a liking to her. What I like best of all is how much she resembles you.”

“...Huh?”

Angie tenderly captured Lynette’s face between both hands, then drew closer. Lynette’s cheeks bloomed red. She was too stunned to do anything in response.

Out of nowhere, Livia said, “Angie *does* like women, after all.”

My jaw dropped.

“I’ve had enough bad experiences with men by this point to put me off the whole lot,” Angie explained. “What about you, Livia? You’re not into men either, are you?”

“Nope, I’m not.”

Hearing all of this, I just had to clarify, “Um, you two know I’m a man, right?”

The two girls stared blankly at me. *Don’t tell me they’re exasperated with me for asking that?*

Livia’s brows knitted. “You are who you are regardless, right?”

“W-well, yeah. I guess so...?”

I couldn’t argue the point. I was still Leon, yes, but I was also a man at the same time.

“Then there’s no problem.”

“How do you figure?! There’s definitely a problem in my book! I’m a dude, so you girls must not like me! Right?!”

Angie shook her head. “There’s no issue there. I might hate men, but I like you. I fell for you as a person, so your gender doesn’t matter to me.”

I pictured a line like that coming more easily from a man’s lips than a woman’s, but it made my pulse quicken just the same.

Angie turned her gaze back to Lynette. “But that’s also why my interest is piqued, finding a girl who looks so much like you.”

“Right. Wait, what?” I nearly agreed with her before catching myself. Something about this didn’t quite make sense. I was busy second-guessing myself when Marie appeared beside me to tug at my shirt. She gave me a pouting, imploring look. “Wh-when did you get here?!”

Marie glared at Lynette. “You’d better not get ahead of yourself! Big Bro only has one little sister, and that’s me!”

Panicked, I slapped a hand over her mouth, shocked she would declare something like that out in the open. “Idiot! Why say that here, of all places? Keep your big trap shut! You’re only going to make things

unnecessarily complica—huh...?” I glanced up hesitantly to gauge Angie and Livia’s reactions, but the two of them had disappeared.

Marie had vanished too. The only people left in the plaza were Luxion and me. Well, besides Lynette and Luxia.

“H-huh? Where did they go? Marie’s gone as well. Hey, Luxion!”

Before I could confirm with him what exactly was happening, an alarm blared in my ears.

“Master, please awaken. It is time for you to leave your bed and get ready.”

I opened my eyes to find myself in bed. I dragged myself upright.

“Oh? You’re being exceptionally compliant today,” Luxion remarked with his usual sarcasm.

I took my time before glancing over at him, but he looked just as I always remembered him. I had to wonder: Had everything I’d seen moments ago only been a dream? “Hey,” I said. “Tell me what the side effects are of that pill I took last night.”

“Based on your reaction, it seems safe to assume you already experienced them for yourself. Exactly as you might imagine, the primary side effect is to experience a dream that feels very much like reality.”

What an insane side effect, I thought, letting out a breathy sigh. “Well, that’s a relief to know. In the dream, I met some cousin I’d never heard of before. And you had a little sister.”

“I do not have a younger sister.”

“Right?! Ugh, thank heavens. I had another huge shock when Angie and Livia told me they’ve got no interest in men.”

“Please review the side effects of any medications before consuming them in the future. Now, having settled that matter...” Luxion’s voice trailed off as he prepared to launch into my schedule for the day. “Julius and the other boys’ little sisters will be attending the academy as of this term.

They have requested a meeting with you beforehand, so we are to visit them prior to the entrance ceremony today.”

All five of those idiots have little sisters? I wondered for a split second before suddenly my suspicion began to grow. I had never once heard anything from them about their little sisters coming to the academy. Was this, too, a dream? Or was this reality? *Crap, which is it?!*

Afterword

DID YOU ENJOY the eighth installment of *Trapped in a Dating Sim: The World of Otome Games is Tough for Mobs*? I'm the author, Yomu Mishima. This volume was intended to serve as a kind of break between story arcs. The arc with the Alzer Republic has ended, tying up a pretty heavy plot within the series, so I wanted to take a lighter touch here. That was why this volume ended up focusing on Nicks and Dorothea.

Dorothea first appeared as a reward for those who filled out a questionnaire. She never showed up in the web version of the story, so I suspect most readers aren't familiar with her. Those who would like to see more of her are welcome to fill out the questionnaire so that they can gain access to the special story reward, *Marie's Route*.*

In the next volume, we'll head straight into the third installment of the otome game series. Leon and the others should give us a good show—probably...

Anyway, I hope you will continue to support the series!

* *Marie's Route* and all related content is not yet available in English.



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